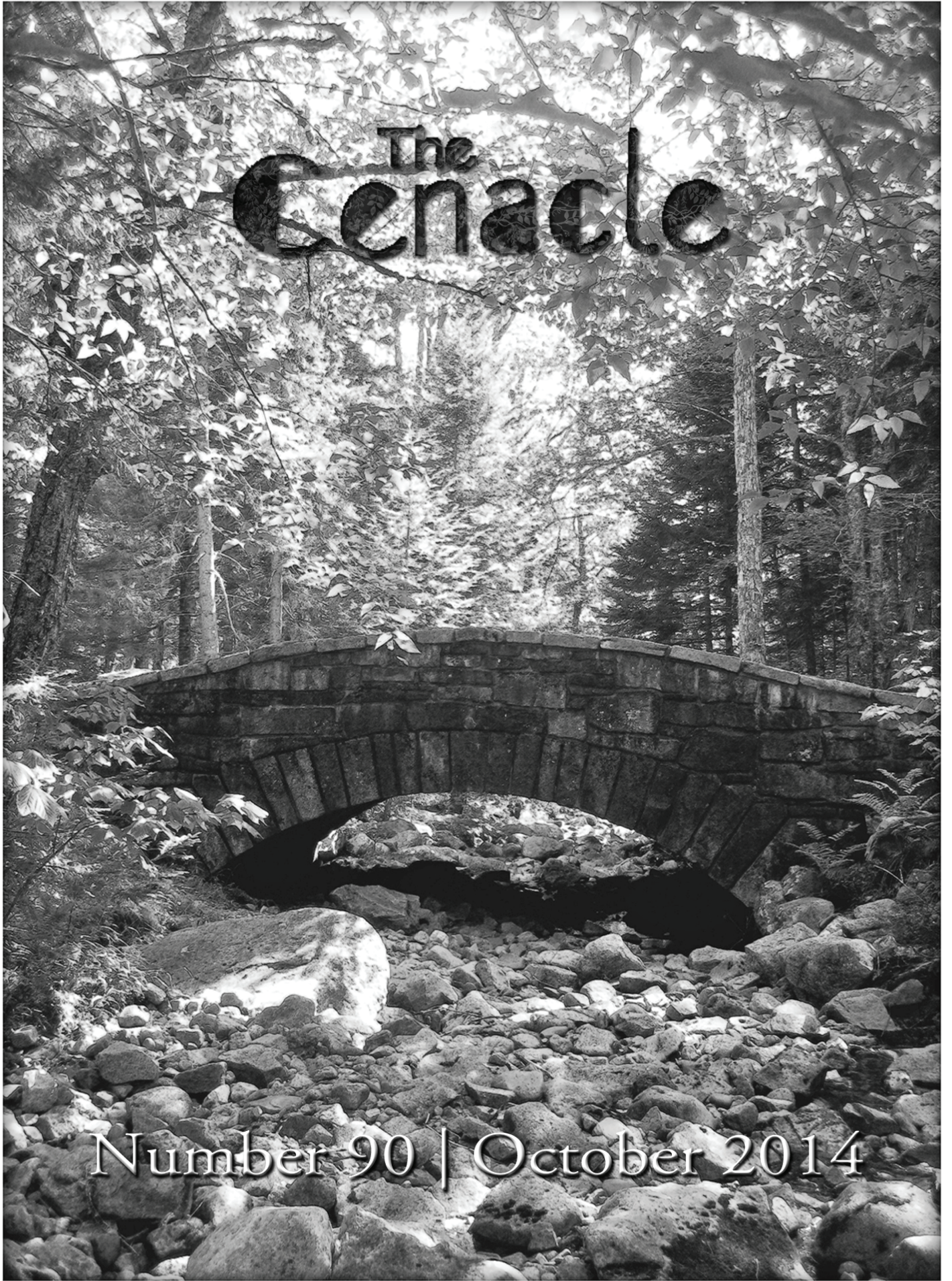
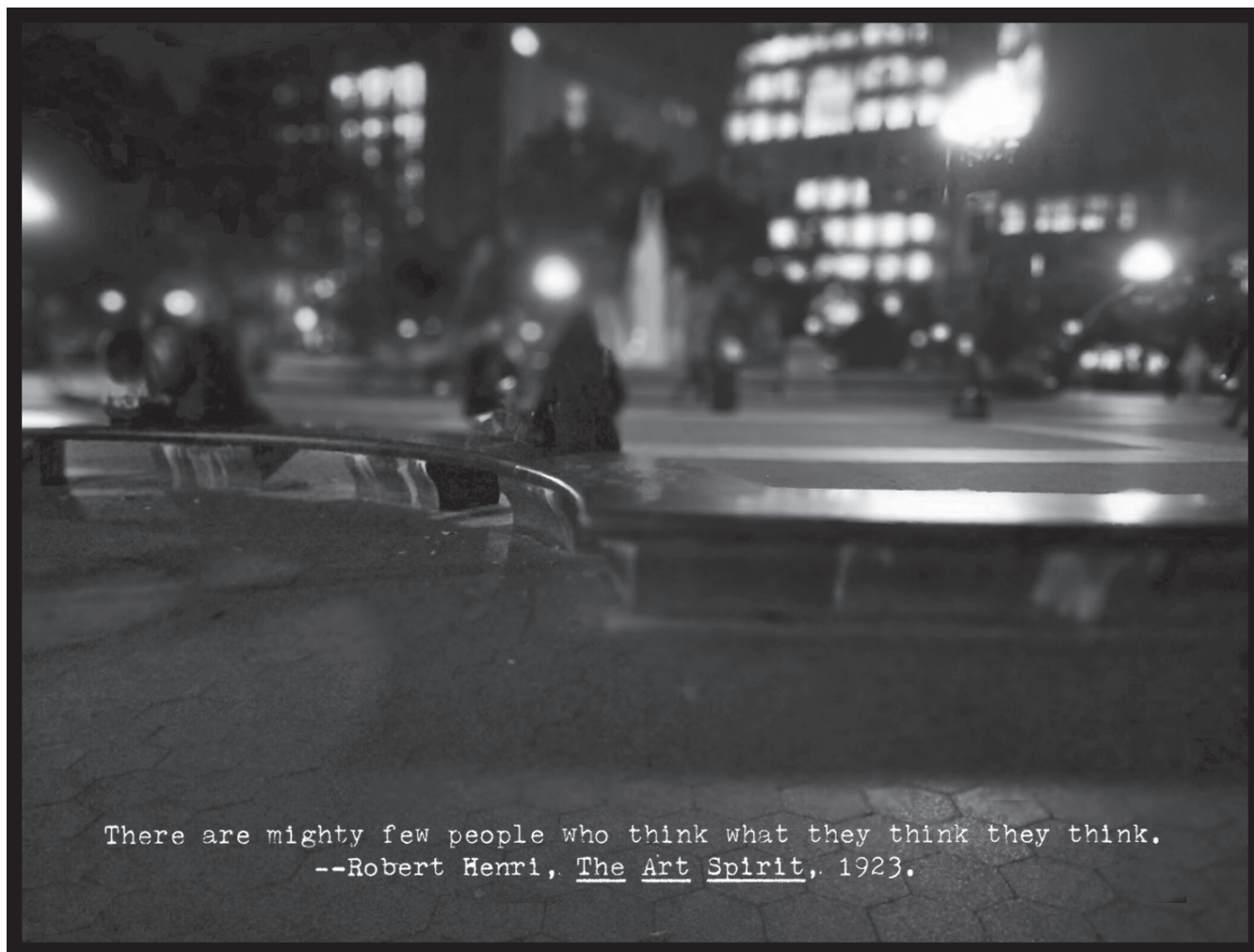


A black and white photograph of a stone arch bridge over a rocky stream in a forest. The bridge is constructed from large, dark stones and is surrounded by dense foliage and trees. The water in the stream is dark and reflects the surrounding environment. The overall scene is serene and natural.

The Cenacle

Number 90 | October 2014



There are mighty few people who think what they think they think.
--Robert Henri, The Art Spirit, 1923.

From Soulard's Notebooks

October 25, 2014
Christian Science Park—
near Reflecting Pool
Boston, Massachusetts

Dear President Obama,

This begins my eighth letter to you, sixth since you've been the sitting American President. I've written to you annually since 2008, & also publish each letter in my independent literary journal, *The Cenacle*.

As I write to you this time, the mid-term Congressional elections are just over a week away. The Democrats may barely keep the Senate, or may not.

The country is in the mostly-media-driven frenzy of the Ebola virus crisis. Happily, it does not appear we'll all, at least for now, go the way predicted in *28 Days Later* or *The Walking Dead*.

The economy seems vaguely recovered from its 2008 depths. Unemployment is down to 5.9%.

And yet. And yet. The U.S. has been revealed to be even more of a Big Brother spy at home, & ever less of a legitimate peacemaker abroad.

And yet. And yet. The FCC's drive to gut Net Neutrality has been, best said for now, slowed. You've publicly spoken out, on the right side of history in this matter. How would you have become President without a free & open Internet?

Healthcare reform roots ever deeper into the nation's bureaucratic structure. Republicans have all but given up on their politically-driven efforts to repeal it. They essentially have no argument (or alternative) to convince millions of people that being uninsured again is a good idea. This legislation, along with withdrawing troops from Iraq & Afghanistan, will likely stand as your administration's greatest achievements. Not perfect, but pretty damned good. These, & being the first non-Caucasian American president.

And yet. And yet. Why is your party not winning back the House of Representatives & easily keeping the Senate? Why does *Harper's Magazine* fear Democrats will support your ideologically like-minded colleague, Hillary Clinton? Why do Democrats campaigning this election season tout your healthcare reforms but steer clear of you?

Why. I think there's no plain answer. You were elected with an emotional mandate in 2008, & an expedient one in 2012. The first to crush the Bush cabal & hurry them out of D.C. (they never really left but it was good enough for then). The second because you had done some good things (war draw-down, healthcare), deserved more time & because, honestly, Mitt Romney was such a corporate tool that listening to him talk made too many people ill to allow him any chance of winning.

But here you are, now, your election victories behind you, your lame duck status fairly assured no matter what happens this Election Day. Washington will get nothing done, or even less.

I wonder what the Barack Obama of 2014 would tell the 2008 Obama, if he could. Perhaps that the hallucinatory fervor of that November cannot last. Perhaps that being President can be both the most powerful & paralyzing position in the world. Perhaps that your

years in office will disappoint progressive ideologists but the families of soldiers & sick people will not fail to praise you.

I'm trying to remember what I felt toward you in 2008. I've re-read all the letters I've written to you. I've seen their downward trajectory from hope & praise to worry to pleading to . . . resignation tonight. I realize that what I wanted then was a philosopher-statesman, a visionary, a poet. I saw these qualities in you as a candidate. Many did.

What you became was a semi-successful administrator. To use a sports metaphor, you took over a last place (feeling) team, coached it back to the playoffs, won a couple of memorable games there. But your opponents figured out that you had no new secret strategies for winning. You gave a good pre-game speech, your players were reasonably well-coached, but you *weren't that unbeatable*.

Maybe the hard lesson to learn is that we're never going to get a philosopher-statesman in this country. Maybe it's for the best. Politics is an ugly business of money & special interests, & lying with a pretty smile. Politics is whoring for power over others. Politics is for the kind of arrogant solipsistic personality nobody wants to have in their family or workplace (though most of us have them).

My hope is that progressives stop with the idea of a high road vs. low road approach to governance. That we stop trusting your kind to stay true to any virtuous path. That we elect you to accomplish good & should have little to no patience for your continual compromises & endless pleas for patience.

My hope is that we understand for good hereon that a man or woman sells his soul to win political office, to be thrust by effort into the unnatural position of deciding the fates of others unknown, never to be met.

Your kind's willingness to engage this activity should be treated with pity, & expediency. You're not the heroes of society, if any of you ever were. (We have plenty of those—every society does—artists, teachers, scientists, doctors, philosophers, athletes, clergy—some famous & many known only to a few.) You are its prime functionaries, enjoined to keep this unsustainable, earth-destroying, poverty enslaving market capitalism, built on endemic structural inequalities, from collapsing sooner than it will. You keep your aggregate thumb in the dyke. Until the time comes, desperately soon, when we collectively enact a better idea than dykes.

You've done some good. You've more than that prevented others from doing much harm. But you've shown this nation & the world at large that believing that a man-hero will come along to rescue us from our societal failures is a simplistic & pathetic idea.

I hope your failure both to govern inspirationally & well will help more & more of us to stop waiting for this to ever occur again.

Peace,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Raymond Scharf, Jr." with a stylized flourish at the end.

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The Cenacle

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Edited by Raymond Souland Jr.

Assistant Editor: Kassandra Souland

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SCRIPTOR PRESS



NEW ENGLAND

2014

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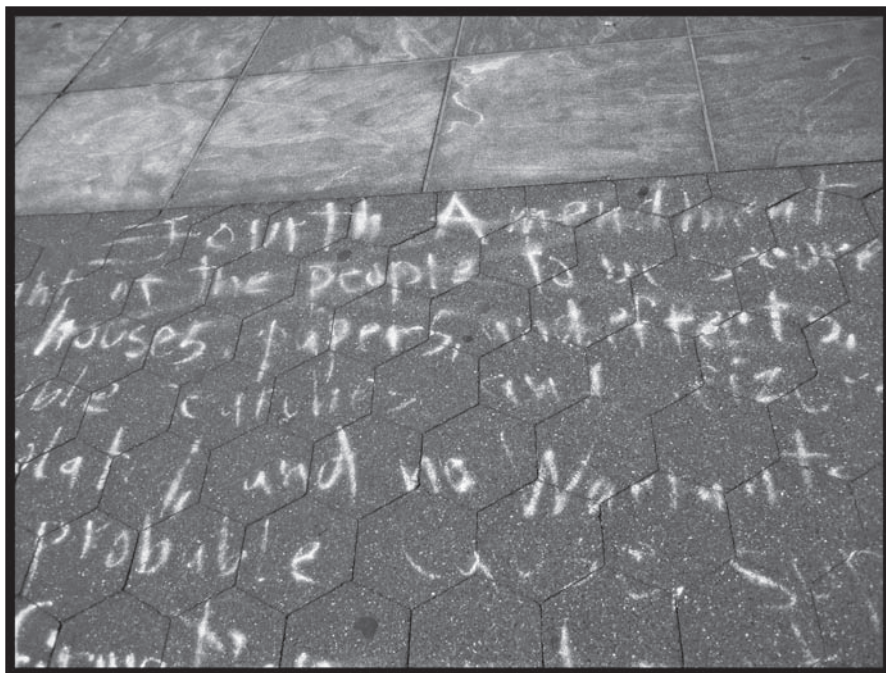
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- Burning Man Books #1-66
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Thank you to the great state of Maine, & great island of Manhattan, for inspiring much of the visual content of this issue . . . same Beauty in such different guises . . .



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Notes from New England

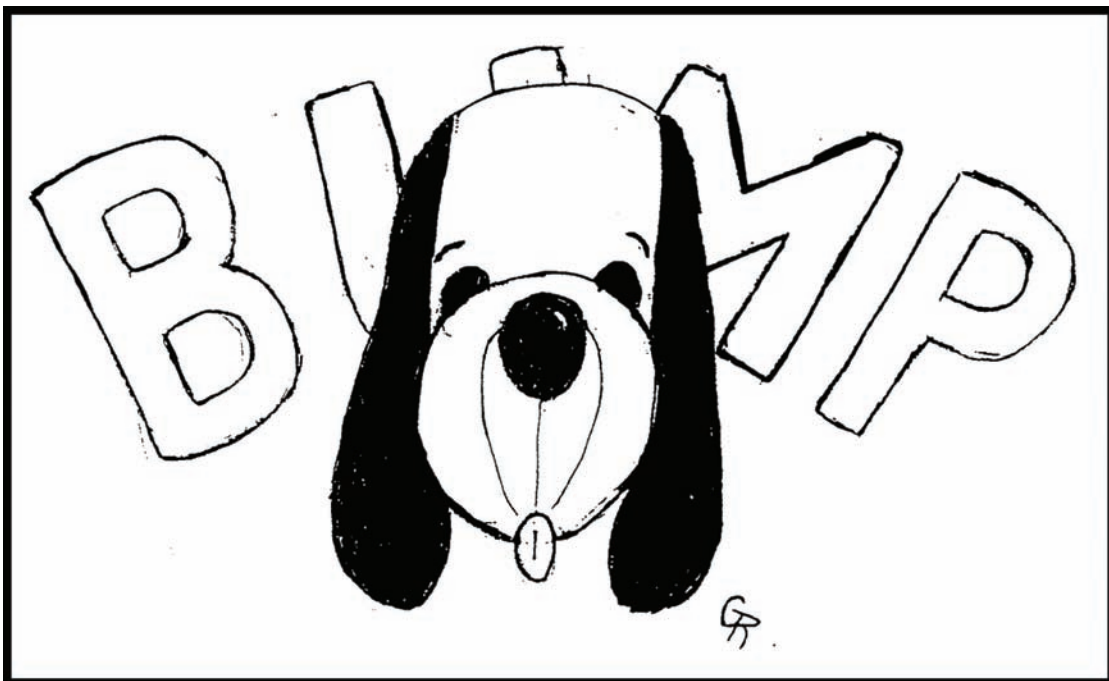
[Commentary]

*“Please accept this ragged purse
of high notes.”*

The following continues the series originally called Notes from New England, begun in issue 24-25 (Winter 1998), then revived in issue 59 (October 2006) as Notes from the Northwest, & appearing since issue 75 (October 2010) under its original title. It is intended as a gathering-place for observations of various lengths upon the world around me. It will be culled, like much of my writing, from my notebooks, and perhaps these thoughts will be expanded upon sometimes as well.

What is Bags End? A Reader's Guide Part 1: 1985-2003

1. Bags End is a fantasyland I've been writing about since 1985 (though it was created by my sister & me years earlier), 16 notebooks of handwritten pages, & counting. Written in the form of issues of *Bags End News*, edited by Algernon Beagle. Nearing 400 issues, at this writing, usually 10 pages an issue.
2. Fantasyland like those (mostly) Victorian-era books I love so much: L. Frank Baum's *Wizard of Oz* series; A.A. Milne's *Winnie-the-Pooh* books; J.M. Barrie's *Peter Pan*; Kenneth Graham's *Wind in the Willows*; Lewis Carroll's *Alice* books—plus the more recent Narnia books of C.S. Lewis, Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings*, & Jim Henson's TV show *Fraggle Rock*.
3. “Bags End” because originally my sister's stuffed animals put into paper bags to save from crush in toy box—and then three brown laundry bags (mother's idea)—& I was reading Tolkien describing the home of Baggins Hobbits as called *Bag End*.
4. My sister Christine became “Miss Chris” in the stories, child heroine & friend to Bags End Friends—like Oz's Dorothy, Wonderland's Alice, Narnia's Lucy. Because human cultures foster great, good, magical beliefs in children they proceed to strip bare, repudiate violently, in adolescence, & thus adults look back over a wasteland of teenage years to what seems like youthful glory years. Distortions fantasylands slantly salve.
5. From the outside, Bags End looks like three filled brown laundry bags, sitting on a little chair in the corner of Miss Chris's bedroom. Within, something like a many-leveled apartment building, but no known top or bottom. Most floors have doors running up



& down both the sides of their hallways. At the far end of most levels is a sudden edge, the side of Bags End. Each level is connected by a ramp rather than stairs. Because some citizens don't have legs (Betsy Bunny Pillow, for example). Also because my three brothers were/are handicapped & I am peculiarly sensitive to the many in this world who struggle physically, mentally, otherwise.

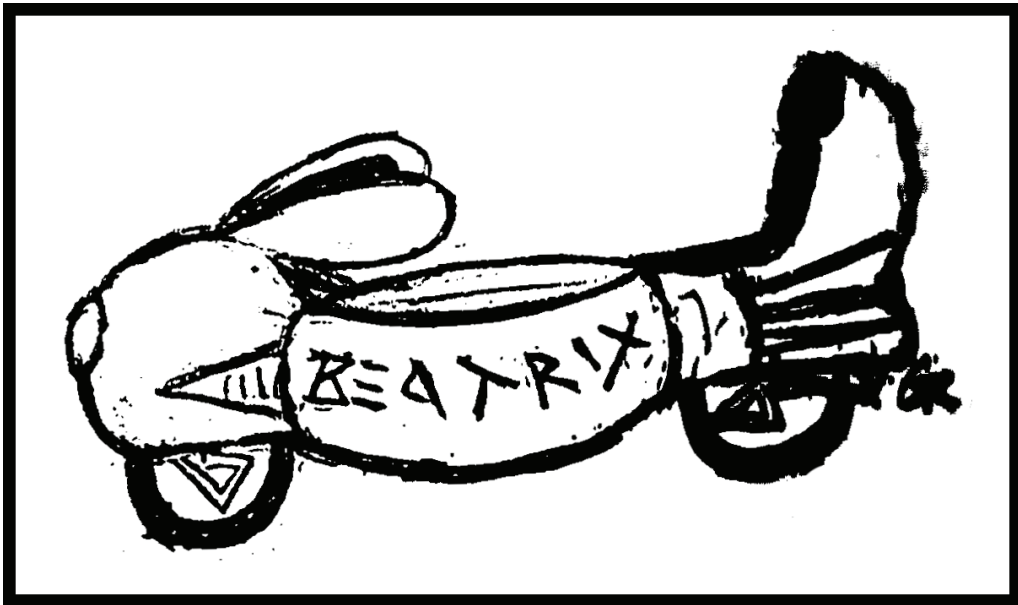
6. Some of the doors lead to apartments; others to other lands (such as Imagianna). Our most familiar friends in Bags End seem to live on several levels somewhere in the middle of Bags End. They travel, when Sheila Bunny gets the whim to explore, to places much higher up & lower down in Bags End. For example, Sheila leads them on an expedition to the ambiguous top of Bags End; to the levels below where there had been a kind of failed commune; over the edge of Bags End; & on the road in search of Bags End's meaning (inspired by Kerouac's *On the Road*).
7. One of the doors in Bags End leads to Imagianna, where Princess Chrisakah & Boop her servant (who looks like a turtle but isn't one) live in a strange & wonderful castle. When I was 17, I loved a girl named Jennifer & we decided to write a book together integrating her fantasy stories & my Bags End. The idea of Crissy & Boop & Imagianna came from those times, & I kept it long after Jennifer & I parted. Crissy is something of a tomboy, wearing blue jeans under her princess dress & wishing more to dance with her dear friend Algernon Beagle to songs by R.E.M., rather than doing her "princess exercises" as Boop wishes. Crissy is also some kind of twin to Miss Chris.
8. Part of why Crissy gets restless in Imagianna is that Bags End is full of idiosyncratic characters forever chasing after weird schemes. These are told of in Algernon Beagle's newspaper *Bags End News*. Algernon Beagle edits & writes *BEN* with his good friend Lori Bunny, who is a smart bespectacled orange bunny. Algernon is always chasing after these figures—Sheila Bunny, Betsy Bunny Pillow, Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow, & others—and telling their stories in his newspaper.
9. Betsy Bunny Pillow escaped from the Bunny Pillow Farm on the night before she would have been picked & sold to rich people by Farmer Jones. Miss Chris finds her in her front yard, dirty & terrified, & takes her in as a refugee. She becomes Miss Chris's friend, not her possession, & seems to live in Bags End. But only until she is able to liberate the Bunny Pillow Farm & all the pillows growing in clustered fields there. Betsy leads a variety of attacks on Farmer Jones & the Bunny Pillow Farm over the years. More & more of the Farm's origins & purposes are revealed over time. It is one of Bags End's most epic stories.
10. A rival, perhaps sort of friend, of Betsy's is Lisa-Marie Chow, self-styled Sargent in the Army of the Babys (vaguely inspired by Baum's Oz books). Sheila & Miss Chris are the generals & the only apparent soldier is Ramie the Toy Tall Boy. But Ramie is a known Lazybug & so often marches in his sleep unto a fallen heap. Being something of a baby, Lisa-Marie will yell, scream, nap too. Strangely, she considers Hawkeye from *M*A*S*H* to be her "dwaddy." Also occasionally addicted to "Stay Awake" pills & all night jumping.
11. The Blondys 3 somewhat counter troublesome personages such as these. Tammy, Sammy,

& Simmi (the youngest, a cheerleader). The Blondys are little blonde girls who float because they don't know the Law of Grabitee (Bugs Bunny reference) They will often show up when Algernon or other little guys are in peril, & urge niceness. Else, they will have a "blonde tear." Seems to be a serious consequence. Blondys like David Bowie (naturally, him being kind of floaty & often blonde himself).

12. Not troubling to the Blondys usually but a trial for his brother Algernon is the tall, coveralled Alexander Puppy. Perhaps to satirize something, or for some other reason, Alexander says only one word: "Bump." But for him this single word signifies a whole language—& further a much more elegant one than English. Algernon, being an English-loving loyalist (doesn't even know Puppy language), is driven crazy by Alex's Bumping ways. Luckily for both is their mutual friend, the "language-knowing guy" (as Algernon puts it), Allie Leopard. Through him they argue & debate & arrive at no better compromise than a vaguely persistent brotherly affection. Alex one time runs for mayor on an all-Bump platform but, thankfully, does not win.
13. Elections for mayor of Bags End is what purple-eyed Sheila Bunny usually wins. Usually because others are not willing to do the voluminous (if equally mysterious) amount of paperwork being Mayor requires. Not only Mayor, Sheila (in a move vaguely inspired by Queen Elizabeth I) has declared herself King, Emperor, Monarch, & whatever other titles she can think up or happen to need. Usually, she is found in her Throne Room (Miss Chris is an artist who made her throne & crown special for her), listening to "good jazz guys like Miles, Trane, Bird, Dizzy, or those even stranger E.S.T. guys" (A.B), or just plain napping, her adopted brother Algernon on his little matt nearby, but not too nearby. Only Miss Chris & Princess Crissy can join her in the Royal Throne, though occasionally Betsy has muscled in. Sheila is a benign despot, though, unless you interrupt her jazz records or her naps. Oh, & she plays purple trumpet in Sheila's Kool Jazz Band.
14. Another aspect of Mayor Sheila's job is the periodic inspection by Iggy the Inspector. Apparently employed by the Fantasyland Committee to travel to famous places like Oz & Wonderland & Narnia, as well as more obscure places like Bags End, to determine if they are being "good." This does not work out well for Bags End where Sheila is barely able to argue the Inspector into giving them D-'s. (Like Peppermint Patty in *Peanuts*). Eventually, Bags End does get an F & all sorts of additional trouble comes of it.
15. Another strange figure in Bags End is Leo the Dark Man whose odd sense of humor & corner-skulking ways are based on one of my brothers. Leo was a kind of villain but somewhat reformed, & was given the job of Janitor of Bags End (mostly involving scraping Miss Chris's old bubble gum off the side of Bags End). Otherwise Leo is to be found in his room, reading endless issues of his favorite superhero comic, *Action Man*.
16. As he writes *Bags End News* & is beagleboy journalist on the spot with most major doings, Algernon Beagle's personality & perspective color much of what we see as Bags End. Adopted by the Bunny Family that also includes Sheila & Lori, Algernon occasionally yearns for his long-lost Mommy Beagle who might live in Peoria, Illinois (funny-sounding town name, no offense). Algernon will often visit Princess Crissy in Imagianna for fun, & loves the songs of Men at Work as much as she loves R.E.M. (the '80s didn't completely

suck for music). One big aspect of Algernon's personality: he hates all foods but one (O! Food but one! Yuk!), so refrain offering. Other than that, he loves Bags End & writing his newspaper & is a fairly polite guy (just the food thing).

17. While many in Bags End with big guy plans—such as Betsy Bunny Pillow, Lisa-Marie Chow, & Sheila Bunny—will give Algernon little respect (either because of his newspaper or possibly his big nosebone), the Weeds, wherever they may grow, consider him King & cheer his name. Seems he believes they get a bad rap, & need an advocate. But he always cries “O shucks!” to their cheering him their King, being a humble guy (which means both modest & low to the ground). Occasionally foes of the Weeds (such as Betsy Bunny Pillow) will come around, & Algernon's little bravery will get put on the line. Willingly, as he is a sincere advocate.
18. Algernon was sick for awhile, hard to say why, a cold, ennui, & when he recovered he was given by his friends and family a gift: Milne's Porch. It is reached by climbing through Algernon's bedroom window: a porch looking out from the edge of Bags End to the skies beyond. A comfortable chair to sit in to write his newspaper, nap, visit (named after the author of the *Winnie-the-Pooh* books, A. A. Milne, who himself could name dozens of his other novels & plays he wishes you had also read or could remember).
19. One of the pleasures Bags End friends share together is to sit at night on Miss Chris's front step where Ramie reads to them from a good storybook like *Wizard of Oz* or *Peter Pan* or such, & then they all look for the Bunny Star in the sky. The Bunny Star hops across the sky, always curious, always on the move, so that astronomers don't get to map her location. The Bunny Star is a mysterious being whose full story is for many years unknown. But looking for her sure is a fun game for all.
20. Not so much fun for Algernon Beagle is the occasional appearance of his “crazed relatives,” Alice Beagle & Dr. Horatio Algernon. He seems to always be away when they come but he hears plenty about their “crazed doings.” Alice is Algernon's sister, & looks like him but for the scarf she wears. Also, she loves all food & will eat almost anything, including a try for Bags End friends themselves! “O! Food! Yum!” she cryeth, & best keep out of her way. Dr. Horatio Algernon also looks like Algernon himself but is very old & moans constantly about his “aches and pains.” Although in a medical crisis he is summoned along with the little furry Dr. Greenface & Dr. Purple-Purple Eyes (a version of Sheila but dress-less), Dr. Horatio Algernon quickly becomes more interested in his own painful situation.
21. Bags End friends go to Bags End School which is taught by Mr. Oliver Owl. Mr. Owl teaches many subjects, although Sheila complains he does not spend enough time on the most important ones like jazz or carrots. Although occasionally altercations will break out among Sheila Bunny, Lisa-Marie Chow, & other “grumpy big guys” (as AB describes them), everyone admires Mr. Owl's knowledge & tries to behave.
22. There are a number of puppies in Bags End, including Denny & Corey Puppy. Denny is a little bulldog & Corey is a golden retriever. They have an impressive act they sometimes perform of flying through the air, Corey upside down & his big fluffy ears stretched out like wings, Denny sitting upright on Corey's paws. They call their act the “Earplane.” They



are also members of the Secret Puppy Club whose members like to meet in secret to bark & ruff & woof. Algernon is not a member because he prefer English to Puppy tongue. “Fooney!” says he.

23. Another great performer is Leona Lion, also called a “grrr girl,” who is a pretty lion cub with a long tail. She loves to leap long distances, & even tries to give Algernon leaping lessons & teach him about the great leapers in history. He does leap, sort of, & is glad that at least he does not break. Leona’s daddy is Aslan from the *Narnia* books. At times Bags End will cross into the human world like this, or at least its artistic realm.
24. Elaine El, mommy to Polly, is the PostMistress of Bags End, & runs the General Store & Post Office. Algernon suspects there is food in the store (he is right) & so Mrs. El will deliver letters to him right on Milne’s Porch.
25. The mystery of how Bags End came to be is a long-time one. How did three laundry bags of stuffed toys become the single strange apartment building of levels, doors, rooms, hallways, ramps, & beings not known to the familiar Bags End friends? What magicians & magic brought it all together?
26. Another mystery is Ramie the Toy Tall Boy. One story says he was the last toy for sale in the closing for business toy store, & Sheila & Miss Chris brought each a penny to pay for him. Yet he also seems to have initially assembled Bags End from paper bags to laundry bags. Which? Both somehow? What else?
27. Like in the Oz books, there is no money in Bags End. Hugs, kisses, & pats in their place. Nobody is poor & thus subjugated, & nobody is rich & thus overlord. Take away the idea of money from a place, & much changes. Work is done for its own value & for love of certain tasks, skills, arts, crafts. There is no meaningful market competition for nobody depends on profits to live. What of trash collection & such other jobs few would want but are needed? Everyone takes a turn. Laws? No money means nobody needs to go wanting. The community grows as a single entity, not a squabbling nest of resentfully shared dependencies.

Would this work among humen as it does among those in fantasylands? One need only ask: what advantage the current system of overlord & subjugated? It would not be perfect & yet there’s no reason to think it would not be better. Tis fear of the unknown, & of mortality, that keeps this world’s slowly sinking ship of life limping along through seas, beneath skies, that it is ever more poisoning as much as its passengers.

28. Nobody ages or dies in Bags End, also like the Oz books. Miss Chris had a birthday at one point, turned “5,” & it seems most of the Bags End friends are “2.” But these numbers don’t mean the same as in the rest of this world. What would it mean not to grow old, sick, fear death? Unlike no money, which has happened in history, could happen again, youthful immortality still seems only a dream. Bags End came to be a long time ago; I was a teenager, my sister a child. Neither of us are now. Yet in the stories we are what we were then.

What has changed are the stories themselves. My years of devotion to writing, reading, the gain of experience both sublime & humble, has made me able to compose better stories than those years ago. And yet, Algernon still runs from food (O! Yuk!); Sheila crunches carrots in her throne, listens to jazz, naps; Sargent Lisa-Marie Chow keeps a look-out for her Lazybug “swolger.” And so on. Same, not the same.

Baum’s last Oz book was his 14th, *Glinda of Oz*. As long from now as possible, but still true, I’ll one day write the last Bags End story. At least Ramie & Miss Chris & Sheila & Algernon & the rest will live on.

29. Among the many other Bags End friends are: Polly El, who walks slowly & says “Dee-da-dee-da-dee-dee” as she goes. She has a Magic Peanut that comes back after having been eaten. Just open up the little can it comes in; Jackie Clown, who lives in a box & talks Squeak language. He tells jokes in Squeak too, & usually laughs happily at them. His laugh, his smiling red-cheeked face, & his crooked red haircut often cause others to laugh at his jokes, even if they don’t know Squeak & Allie Leopard isn’t around to translate for them; Jill Boot, a yellow boot that squeaks too. Styled after the old nursery rhyme:

*There was an old woman
Who lived in a shoe
She had so many children
She didn’t know what to do*

Jill is quick-tempered & will quickly kick out if frustrated. So be leery.

30. Sheila’s BunnyCycle is a unique vehicle in any world. A bunny-shaped motorcycle that can go very fast. Does not roll on wheels, however, but hops speedily along. Sheila wears a helmet, of course, for safety’s sake, & occasionally brings along a terrified Algernon Beagle in her side-car, who notes that when they crash he is well-strapped in so it won’t miss. Sheila drives her BunnyCycle on most epic journeys through Bags End & elsewhere.
31. A sometime important holiday in Bags End is the Season of Lights. Derived from the old Festival of Lights display in Hartford’s Constitution Plaza, mixed with my father’s Catholicism, my mother’s Judaism, the Season of Lights is an eight-day festival of candles, decorated tree, & Tchaikovsky *Nutcracker* music, concluding on Christmas Day. In Bags End stories it involves a very big tree. I fell away from celebrating it for awhile, as I really didn’t want to associate with those religions even as I loved my parents as people. I miss the candles, though, the music, the tree with shiny ornaments. A celebration of the year concluded. I have enough will & imagination, I think, to find my way back to & forward with this event.
32. *Bags End News* began because at age 20 I moved away from home yet still wanted to keep my creative relationship with Christine going. So what had been daily play became a weekly newspaper in the mail. The stories were at first simple, told to a smart, sensitive child. Years passed, they became something else, an ongoing myth. A world that became

deeper, stranger, funny, ever more subversive. Christine grew up, went off to college, forged a good career, pursued music, married a good man. “Miss Chris” remained in the stories which, even when I was unsure where to take them next, I keep writing.

The weekly production (which she participated in for an initial stretch of months) slowed after nearly three years: 30 in 1985, 52 in 1986, 53 in 1987, 16 in 1988. Thereafter as few as 1 in 1999. Some new life experiences (travels, books, museums) led me anew into the myth; others (romances, job loss) led me away from them. A stretch of stories in the late ‘90s, few in number over several years, are notable because inspired in part from bits of aphoristic wisdom I picked up from LSD journeys: *It’s OK to be happy; You are not alone; & Write something good.*

33. During the 1986-1987 run, I was living in New Britain, Connecticut, working at an office job in downtown Hartford, 45-minute public bus ride each way. The job, answering phones for orders at a promotional novelty company, was the best that the times & place could offer a newly graduated English major. Yet, I paid my rent, I went to the movies, I collected books & LPs. Mostly, I wrote *Bags End News*, at lunchtime in the lobby of a nearby hotel, & on the ride home in the evening. I could complete an issue nicely in those 45 minutes. Often did my research for issues at the old Hartford Public Library where, years before, I’d skipped so many days from my poisonous, iniquitous high school. Fun bus ride, deep in pen & pages.
34. Opposite to those days was a stretch from July 2001 to March 2003 when I managed the composition of just one issue (20 pages). In the spring of 2001, I’d been living in Boston for 9 years, earned two M.A. degrees (M.A. English, Northeastern University, ‘94; M.A. Publishing & Writing, Emerson College, ‘99), worked bookstore jobs along the way, & was at a contract job at Harvard Business School Publishing that, after over a year, ended suddenly in May 2001. In July I met a girl online I’d obsess with & later over for several years, moving out to Portland, Oregon in a futile effort to win her from a new boyfriend & unfriendly family. Things went bad, worse, I wrote a page of *BEN* during the 9 months I lived in the Pacific Northwest (Seattle too).

I finally finished the issue along the Greyhound bus trip back East—jobless, broke, limping back to Connecticut to a friend’s generous offer of a spare room. It was very hard to keep hold of these good sweet stories, this land created in such a different time of my life—I did, barely, because I am stubborn, but also because Art deserves better than to be forgotten in hard times. If at all possible, ways should be found to make Art that both reflects & transcends those times. I believe this fervently even as I’ve struggled to enact it.

35. I’ve tried to write *Bags End* stories outside of the structure of *Bags End News*. They are few & successful in a limited way. *Bags End* is best told by Algernon Beagle in the form of his newspaper. He is the editor; Lori Bunny writes it down; & Sheila is the King. Strange editorial title but she’s had it from issue 1 (June 12, 1985). Within the first several months, Ramie’s “Game Page” was added, which includes a fun game & “Sheila Says: Learn New Words!” (a new word each issue). Also, a “Letters to the Editor” page. Early on,

a “Classified” page, which did not last. And sometimes in the main section a guest-written column or Algernon will interview a Bags End or other related personage. The stories in the newspaper became multi-part pretty early on. Algernon’s funny accent (vaguely Scottish) is translated through his idiosyncratic spellings in his beloved English.

I had already sustained the weekly newspaper format for one imaginal space from when I was 11 to when I was about 19, a youth football league I wrote about in *Sports Page*. Then I created *Newspage* when I was 14 because I had a daily morning paper route & wanted to copy out stories & compose weekly editorials on current events. Then about 18 I created *Scriptor Magazine* to hold all the poetry, fiction, plays, & serials I was now writing. Alongside all this, I wrote for high school & college newspapers & journals. And did some underground magazines with my friends. *Bags End News* is how my writing mind often works: telling an ongoing, evolving story, some at a time, more complex at it goes on. I also like to mix my projects along common borders so that there is crossover & affect. This approach has given me a way to work with the vastless worlds of creation, & structure them to my needs.

36. By 2003, I’d been writing *Bags End News* for 18 years, 309 issues. My output had slowed & slowed. The audience comprising my sister early on, & close artist friends through the ‘90s (at meetings of the Jellicle Literary Guild) were gone from me. I came back to Connecticut in March 2003 with empty pockets & broken-hearted, & finished the aforementioned issue that had lingered with me from my last year in Boston (2001-2002), through my ragged stretch out West (2002-2003), to the retreat East. I lived in my friend’s spare room, looked for work, collected Food Stamps, & went to the food bank. *Bags End News* went on even as the bags themselves were kept in a U-Haul storage place.

I still reached back those many years, to what Bags End had been like with my sister, then the productive years after that. The people, the places, the books, the sense of forward thrust that had inspired me, were low in my mind & heart. I was writing on sentiment, & felt like I might not sustain it.

Yet I kept at it. There were more stories to tell; I just had to figure out how to tell them. It wasn’t until I moved out West again, in April 2004, that I began to discover how to write it all new. It had to do with dreams. With new characters. With figuring out what to keep & what to re-invent. It took several more years to work this out but it did happen. That’s all to be told in the second part of this essay.



To be continued in Cenacle | 91 | December 2014

* * * * *

Judih Haggai

absurd dreams
blanket the night
ludicrous to sleep

* * *

birdsong bursts
all sounds welcome
another day!

* * *

one false step
morning coffee
decorates clean floor

* * *

while we can
walk in the fresh green
breathe air in peace

* * *

between branches
a rattle and a twig
favourite bird appears

* * *

puppet eyes
watch from the corner
work invitation

* * *

brainstorm
three creative heads
travel new roads

* * *

quiet skies
the energy of autumn
my new best friend

* * *

young tree
bears four yellow guava
gifts of fall

* * *

autumn takes a bow
all in a life's work
leave 'em smiling

* * *

question to self:
if i have so many tears,
how much laughter?

* * *

elaborate story
we choose to believe
existence of time

* * * * *



In Painting My Baseboard, I Have Realized that I Would Be a Shitty Swordsman

I have a very humble home. It's been a year in summoning the will to action that my kitchen should look clean for the visitors who might come some day. "Ehhh, it's a wreck in here," I think to myself. I wash the arches with pigment and smoke, feed my feathered lizards, and take the small, selfish grace that comes with watching the finches and sparrows throw good seed to the ground. "I am just like them," I think.

It's harder than it seems, painting the baseboard. The swell of a perfectly pregnant paintbrush, the eye relaying information back to brain and racing at the speed of electricity to the seemingly duldest resident of the body . . . the hand. The ever-slight tremor that comes from being made of meat—and being powered by glucose—betrays all possibility of doing this right the first time. Or the next time.

The brush: I try to get it to swell the same way each time, and yet it's never quite the same. My hand pulls a perfect line and fuels me to draw the next one, but some errant hairs pop from that perfect pearl of pigment and scratch the wall, telling me that it's gone all wrong. I dip the brush and then pull again. I find more work in correcting my error and, with the correcting of error, I find more work.

It's quite a humble activity, and a funny sort of meditation. The mind stills for a moment, and then a friend pops in. An amanita-powered Yoda version of Clark smacks my amygdala with a perfectly greasy stick. Around a mouthful of the last trail mix bar he's stolen from my backpack, he lectures: "Why am I here, Young Cock?" He snatches my water bottle and pours my last gulp out for the finches to bathe, and then disappears from sight.

Brother Gwilly appears next and, with his easy way, both laughs at me and tells me to keep trying. He confides in me that he is going to have a belly laugh and pat me on the back when he sees the work for himself. He tells me with his eyes that *elegance is the intent and not the act of drawing a straight line*. He then reminds me there are no straight lines in nature.

Both of my mothers slide in sideways. I have two mothers. It's a new thing. They have a competition of not being competitive while still patting me on the head and telling me that I've done perfectly—and maybe, *if I love them*, I'll be a good son and get to work prostrating myself at the baseboards of the houses I've never grown up in.

A parade of ex-girlfriends goose-step through, all giving me a sideways thumb indicating that I shouldn't die for my baseboard endeavor, but neither do they approve of my work.

The march of persons and the swell of the brush. The tremor of hand. The fleeting stillness of mind.

The lowest swordsman thanks them for the company.

* * *

Squirrel

When I look out the window in the afternoon, it is common to see the brown squirrel that lives here on the property with me. He's a busy little bastard that collects the sunflower seed that the sparrows and goldfinches can't be bothered to crack—instead just letting them fall to the ground.

The squirrel will bully his way past the ring-necked doves with the same kind of purpose the March Hare had in his own story, squaring up to the bulk of seed. After quickly filling his cheek pouches, bolts for a new place to hide his plenty.

Once he's cleaned up his booty and only the black and white woody shells are left, he retires to the fallen fencepost next to his burrow in the evergreen shrubbery. He will sit there sometimes for up to an hour on his hind legs, paws side by side in the front of him, slanted eyes half-closed. He's not sleeping, but content. The little fucker is absolutely content.

Why can't I attain the contentment of a squirrel? I'm 210 pounds of meat and guts, my brain all by its lonely self weighs as much as ten squirrels. I've got the same hands and the same feet that little brown bastard does. I've got pants pockets instead of cheek pouches and my balls droop a little more than his does, but he's got me utterly whipped in the contentment game.

We're essentially the same, he and I. We've planted the same seed, enjoy the same crab-apple trees, and both of us are on the constant lookout for Gary the Cat. Equal in most things except that I know that I never get the same look on my face that he wears while he's out meditating on the fence-post.

Why can't I achieve the sedate and productive nature of a squirrel?

He showed up in a dream I had Wednesday night of last week, looking like an ambassador of Walter Potter (the English taxidermist who created animal tableaux resembling human life). He was complete with fringed golden epaulets, a monocle, and tiny black leather gloves. He introduced himself as Theodore Seedsack the Second, of the family Seedsack. We sat in the dream den and spoke for a while about the differences between nuts and seeds, then moved on to how the war between the Kingdoms of Cat and Squirrel was going. The hours of our pleasant conversation grew but morning was coming closer. I had to excuse myself for the evening and prepare to rise into the world of men, and to the endless chores the waking world demands.

I gathered up our empty Scotch glasses and took them to the kitchen while Theodore fiddled with his cigarette case in preparation to leave. I walked him to the door and stepped outside with him.

It was at that moment, he looked me dead in the eye and said to me in a gentle tone, "You know, it's easy, Victor."

To which I said, "I know."

* * * * *

Joe Coleman


In Stir

A few years ago I did time in the slammer
 for, I'm loath to admit, my deplorable grammar.
 I thought I'd be charged with a lesser offense
 like the imperfect use of the past-perfect tense
 which my lawyer assured me I might beat because
 he got some client off with a defendant clause
 but much to my family's (and my own) disgrace
 it turned into a major declarative case.
 The verdict was "Guilty." The gavel fell hard.
 I soon walked on gravel in my prison yard.

My run-on sentence for poor punctuation
 did not permit visits, verbs, or "conjugation."
 I worked out with weights and a large dictionary
 to develop my biceps and vocabulary.
 The whole Big House structure was compound/complex.
 I had to rely on both wit and reflex.

My cell-mates were Lex (a con . . .), "Sammy the Shiv,"
 (who was sent up for splitting an infinitive . . .)
 and Paragraph Indent (—nailed having stolen
 an asterisk, hyphen, ellipsis, and colon).
 They smuggled in paper for contraband verse.
 Their typing was awful. Their syntax was worse . . .
 I was forced to list parts of speech, usages, functions . . .
 I was subject to predicates . . . tied with conjunctions.

A linguist (a wordsmith is one definition),
 propositioned me once with a sick preposition:
 I would write things which he'd scan in the can
 then format and type-set. He said, "I've a plan . . .
 I'll publish you!" (These were all transitive lies.
 The crook was intending to plagiarize!)

With participles dangling, taking a shower,
 I was threatened by members of “Metaphor Power.”
 They told me, “Bend over and pick up that pen
 because we want to edit tight writing again!”
 But I busted the pen. The ink ran down the drain.
 The prose never flows if I’m under a strain.

Then Lieutenant Gerund and Adjective Hayes
 (who was armed only with an imperative phrase . . .)
 moved me off Writer’s Block. Three other screws
 found A, E, I, O, U, and Y in some shoes.
 They suspected some poet was getting protection
 in exchange for the vowels in his haiku collection.
 I traded Winstons for alphabet soup
 and established a convicted writers’ group.
 We counted on commas to break up our days
 as I tried to remind them that rhyme never pays.

It was quite a bad period (synonym: spell).
 The warden informed me I wrote very good.
 He contracted—he shortened—my time in the joint
 with no exclamation. But I got the point.

All Past is Prefix.
 The Future’s before us . . .
 I have a new life and a Roget’s Thesaurus.

* * *

Rhode Island Love Story

Jasper came home covered in blood. Most of his insides were outside.
 He staggered into the parlor towards Molly reading her *TV Guide*.
 She said, “Dammit Jasper, what have you done? You forgot the Kentucky Fried!”
 “I’m mighty sorry, Molly,” he said. “Apparently I have died.”
 “Dammit Jasper, how can that be?” she asked him, mystified.
 “Dammit Molly, these things happen . . . get the formaldehyde.”
 “Dammit Jasper, Letterman’s on . . . you don’t look that bad,” she lied.
 Then Jasper sat down. They laughed at Dave,
 as the blood on their carpet dried.
 Molly asked, “Who do you think is better: Letterman or Jon Stewart?”
 “I don’t know, Molly . . . I’m thirsty as heck . . . Is there any embalming fluid?”
 “Dammit Jasper, next thing I guess you’ll be wanting a rabbi or priest
 —which would be premature as we’re not even sure you’re dyed-in-the-wool deceased!”
 “Dammit Molly, I’m dead on my feet . . . I think I’ll hit the sack . . .”
 Then Jasper fetched a spade and dug a dirt-bed out in back.

The following morning it took a while for Jasper to clear his head
 and address the question of what to do now
 given that he was (possibly) dead.
 He showered, shaved, and brushed his teeth and realized as he dressed
 that he’d slept pretty well, tho’, truth to tell, it was *not* Eternal Rest . . .
 “Dammit Molly,” he said to his wife as he came thru’ the kitchen door,
 “we need to decide how we’re going to proceed if I am, in fact, no more . . .
 As I see it, the options which lie before me have limited attraction;
 taxidermy, incineration, or interment with putrefaction,
 any of which are rather unpleasant if I’ve not truly shit the bed.”
 “Dammit Jasper, maybe it’s best if I simply freeze you instead!”
 “Dammit Molly, what are you thinking? I’d be sure to catch a death . . .”
 “Dammit, that’s the least of your worries . . . so save your final breath.”
 “Dammit Molly, given my putative, probable recent demise
 maybe we ought to wait a few days to see if I’m going to rise!”
 “Dammit Jasper, you’re not The Redeemer. You’re not a loaf of bread . . .
 but whoever, whatever you’ve become, I’ll stand by the man I wed.”
 “Dammit Molly, I love you to death,” he tenderly said, happy-hearted.
 “Dammit Jasper, I love you too, my doubtfully dearly departed!”

Molly found coupons for KFC. A few blocks away in Pawtucket
 they finally dined on their chicken together.
 Jasper kicked the empty bucket.

* * *



Farmer's Market (My Vegetable Past)

Near the end of my college education I got into veggie-experimentation.
 Regrettably, as a related result, I joined a vegetable-satanist cult
 and underwent horrid humiliation to pass through their secret initiation:
 The sadistic vegetable-satanists
 tied string-beans and pea-pods around my wrists;
 I was told to sit in the corner, shut up,
 and drink carrot-juice from a plasticine cup.
 Then they took off my jacket and one of my shoes
 and forced me to read *Agricultural News*.
 Just by the hairs on my chinny-chin-chin I survived the ordeal.
 The cult voted me in.
 They gave me my vegetable-satanist name
 and from that moment onward Joe Coleman became

“His Satanic, Majestic, Infernal Dark Lord
 of the Wicked Zucchini, Anathema Gourd,
 and Nasty, Annoying, Demonically Evil
 Cabbage infested with Rootworm and Weevil;
 —His Royal Red Radish, deriving All-Power
 from the Double-Horned, Cloven-Hoofed Cauliflower;
 —And the Deputy Sheriff of Bottomless Pit
 filled with Fire and Brimstone, Hot Peppers and shit;
 —The Devilish Pitchfork-wielding Bane
 of Butternut Squash and Cucumber stain;
 —The Garlic-breath, Turnip-Head Minion . . . Joe!”
 It's a long honorific.
 It's stupid.
 I know.

Then the blasphemous Mark of the Beet was applied.
 I was manicured . . . pedicured . . . plain terrified
 they might re-style my hair or trim down my beard.
 (I'm grateful they didn't . . . that would have been weird!)

I took part in rituals that filled me with shame.
 These all involved produce. The Leeks were to blame . . .
 —like offering our souls to the Great Brussels Sprout
 and crowning a Candied Yam, dancing about
 the Enthroned Potato—or bending the knee
 at the Altar of Cream Cheese on Celery
 —or the communal baking of fresh pumpkin pie.

I watched innocent organic vegetables die.

At two A.M. once we all walked to a farm
 and, after disabling the rooster-alarm,
 we kidnapped some onions and young ears of corn
 and filmed videos of sick vegetable porn;
 rough, lurid, three-way onion-action;
 corn ears getting audio satisfaction;
 corn-kernel-lingus; raw onion kink;
 cream of corn; onion skin . . . worse than you think!
 Then we slaughtered the onions in sacrifice.
 We sliced them and cooked them up with some white rice
 AND WE ATE THEM!—while chanting “Uncle Ben!”
 “Uncle Ben!” over and over again . . .
 In our Leek-induced frenzy we satanically digested the pilaf.
 The corn was set free.

That was my breaking point.
 I’d had enough . . .
 I abandoned the cult and I got off the stuff.
 I joined a Gourmet Club, resumed eating meat,
 and cleaned up my act, my cult-life complete.
 I went back to college and got my degree.
 The vegetable-satanist life’s not for me.
 I burned all the videos ultimately.
 There’s no market for veggie-pornography!

* * *

Prejudice = Stupid

I refuse to speak to Canadians.
 I will not address them at all.
 Caller-I.D. is protecting me if Canadian Mounties call.

I don't like the music of Michael Bublé or Celine Dion one bit.
 Whenever I meet them I do not greet them,
 that's all there is to it.
 I don't care if Toronto Maple Leafs are begging for crusts of bread . . .
 I refuse to speak to Canadians. There's nothing to be said.

When I have to go out to dinner with the Emperor of Quebec
 he sits in shock.
 I do not talk.
 I stick him with the check.

I don't purchase Canadian merchandise . . .
 I won't drive a Canadian car . . .
 I don't use things they make in their gulags . . .
 I won't smoke a Canadian cigar.

I disdain Canadian literature;
 like Cervantes, Dickens, and Sartre . . .
 I won't go to their Prado, Uffizi, or Louvre
 to see their Canadian Artre.

I despise their Canadian palm trees,
 Canadian poi and grass skirts,
 their vodka and kosher tamales,
 rice paddies and flowery shirts . . .

If they kept to themselves
 —if they knew their place—
 there wouldn't be so much fuss.
 I refuse to speak to Canadians.
 They simply aren't like us.

* * *

July 5th

Driftwood summer. Brooding, solemn, pure,
 humid. (Whisper: "Evening . . . balsam air.")
 Raptor Angel. Clouded, lacework moon.
 Anger. Grizzle. Haggard, tragic yawn.

Stubborn mattress. Sleepy. Wet.
 Lesion. Sutures. Achy gut.
 Bedpan. Jaundice. Greasy spit.

Lucent colors dim.
 Vacant slippers dream.

Lonesome death.

Poor Dad . . .

* * * * *





Visitations

[Travel Journal]

The yagé had gotten rid of most of my back pain. I'd worked hard for the cure and the cure had worked hard for me. As far as my teacher was concerned, I'd done well to keep up. "You drank," he said, "like people used to drink in the old days." But he indicated I'd been a little dense for not having seen the sky people that Lázaro danced with.

The next ceremony was just the two of us, Joaquín in one hammock, I in another. He poured a cup of yagé for himself, prayed over it, drank it, poured a cup for me, prayed over it, and gave it to me. I welcomed it, drank it, welcomed it again, hummed a tune for it, felt its cool presence in me. Don Joaquín went to sleep. I went over some of the events of the past week, repeated them to myself, related them to other events, registering them in my memory while waiting for the yagé to come on. . . .

One afternoon I was sitting with my back against one of the posts of Cabaña Supernatura reading a Spanish language comic book version of Dante's *Divine Comedy*. My dictionary was next to me. While the poet was wending his way through the *Inferno*, I was looking up Spanish verbs that meant things like to groan (*gemir*), to wail (*llorar*), to gnash one's teeth (*a rechinar los dientes*). Nearby, Luis, Xiomara, and Mecías were wandering around with their father's blowgun. Bored with devils, I paged ahead to the angels—graceful, robed, in sparkling spheres of light—and wondered what the relationship was between them and the sky people the Secoyas saw. The same thing in different forms? Different species or tribes? Were they all imaginary, as my mom would say? I heard a *Pfff!* and, out of the corner of my eye, saw something fall. Had the kids hit a bird?

Trailed by his siblings, Luis strode over to me bearing dart and prey: a brown and gold butterfly, pierced through one wing, through the abdomen, and through the other wing. I put down the *Divine Comedy* as he handed me this living, low-fat shish kebab, this skewered little angel.

I tried to telepathically communicate with the insect, telling it to let go of its pain and enter the other world. But as soon as I did so, it started beating its wings like mad. I held the fuzzy abdomen gently and worked the dart out by carefully twisting and pulling. The butterfly fluttered away unsteadily and soon became lost among the trees. As I handed the dart back, Luis laughed, not unkindly, at the expression on my face.

I remembered then that, in Waorani territory, I'd wanted to learn to use the blowgun. A year later, having calculated how long it would take me to become proficient, I chose to spend my free time reading and writing. I'd figured out that I wasn't a hunter. And I'd basically given up on my dream of leading the indigenous people in a rebellion. Frankly, I wasn't impressing them as much as I'd hoped. But they'd accepted me as a companion, and the reality of that was more satisfying than the fantasy had been.

In spite of the paca incident. Rocking back and forth in the dimness, as the yagé begins

to come on, I see again the paca springing past me. The big, brown, tasty rodent that Joaquín and I were hunting. The two dogs had chased it and it had sprinted toward me and streaked past in a blur. I could have struck it with my machete, but in that moment I felt sorry for it. It vanished into its burrow. For the next three quarters of an hour Joaquín sat stone-faced on a log and supervised me in the task of carrying water from a nearby stream in one of his rubber boots and pouring it, bootful by bootful, into the hole. I found killing was easier when it was a matter of doing it slowly and following orders. From the surface I could hear the animal as it snarled, then gurgled, then fell silent. The time was half past five. We started to dig down to the corpse through the clayey earth with our machetes, but then it was time to leave so we could be home before dark.

I'd read somewhere that rainforest women scorn unsuccessful hunters by refusing to look directly at them, and, when we got back and Joaquín told the story to Maribel and Xiomara, I found it was true. Only on the following day, once we'd gone back with a shovel and dug out the wet, furry corpse, and brought it back to the hut, was I no longer treated as an invisible nonentity.

When I was a small child, a friend stomped on an anthill and invited me to join in killing the frantic ants that scuttled this way and that. I refused, imagining that there might be powers that stood in the same relationship to me as I stood to the ants. In being merciful, I sought to deserve those powers' mercy as well. From then on, I've treated live animals as I've hoped to be treated. So even as an adult, I'm useless as a hunter.

But can I be a healer? Joaquín has told me that each night that one drinks yagé is called a house, and that once I've drunk 15 houses of yagé, I'll be able to cure any illness. This house is number four. *Any illness?* I wonder, as multicolored lights wink on in the darkness and my body becomes flexible and diffuse. *Even AIDS and cancer?* I doubt it, but I'm willing to try.

Joaquín remarked in another conversation that he didn't know if I'd be able to turn into a jaguar, because I'm so tall. "They having jaguar tunics in their house that they giving people to put on," he explained. "I don't know if they having one big enough for you." He seemed serious about this. Now, amid the gathering of the multicolored lights of the soul, I remember I used to want to shapeshift when I was a teenager, and I concluded then that I'd have to die before I could do so. Tonight I still doubt I could shapeshift but, as with the healing, I'm willing to try.

The transformation that's inevitable is death. I imagine how much damage my body could sustain before dying. I wonder if the thought is a premonition that one day I'll die under torture. I wonder what it would take to get me to kill someone else. Old superstitions about death suddenly make sense. The forces of nature get hungry like everything else. So Aztecs fed hearts to the sun. Celts sliced open bellies, wrapped intestines around trees, burned people in wicker cages. Earlier this very year in Rwanda, the earth thirsted for blood and drove Hutus to kill a million Tutsis. I revisit my strange equation: the more pain before death, the more pleasure after. Nezahualcoyotl's story about the sun dance comes back: how his unspeakable pain bloomed into ecstasy. I see again before my eyes Bishop Labaka speared by Tagaeris, his face peaceful, his lips parted in a soft smile.

I ponder the bloody history of Europe. Cultures have always needed to make war and alliances and more war to avoid being conquered by whoever's in the next valley, city-state, nation. It's clear now that it's all movements of energy, creating, destroying, rebuilding themselves in larger and stronger forms and structures. The less-vital are constantly being killed

by the more-vital, maximizing vitality in the world of the living. Violence is the fastest way to move energy and break down outmoded forms. And groups that are sworn enemies in one cycle of time can become allies in the next. The French and the British, for instance. They're friends now.

That brings me back to my personal life. After my parents split up, my mom taught me that my dad was evil, banal, foolish. I believed that for years. Her hatred ebbed after I swallowed all those aspirins and got sent home from boarding school, because she found herself side by side with him trying to rescue me from the family demons. In fact, one of my motivations for making the suicidal gesture had been to try to end some of that hatred. Later, when my mom and Walter split, she admitted that my dad had always been a pretty decent guy after all. He'd always paid his child support on time, and when money was needed for anything else, he came up with it.

So anyone in the world can be a friend or enemy. It depends on the circumstances and how the players play it.

It's like what Nezahualcoyotl said about the snake: a friend to some, an enemy to others. The monotheists recoiled but the shamans were down with him. *Mr. Snakely Earthwisdom*, I ponder, *our old evilgood friendenemy*. *Christianity and science agree that he once had legs and then lost them; was that a curse? A blessing? Or both? The fruit of the tree of knowledge must have been psychedelic; that's obvious. Why does knowledge grow on trees? And what do snakes know about that?*

The myth of Adam and Eve is based on a true story. It could be eighty thousand years old, passed from mouth to ear. They were the forest-dwelling ancestors of people who later became known as Hebrews. The drug took effect and the snake told them it was time to develop and follow the special path of humanity. "Rise up, humans," he said. "There's a way of knowledge and a destiny. You're greater than apes."

But God said to them, "You blew it, you arrogant fools. You woke up from the animal dream. But if you want to reach the sky, you can work for it and suffer 'til you get there."

To Adam he said, "You'll work for a million years and then some before you'll deserve to live in my Heaven."

Eve he cursed with pain in childbirth, and the cursing of women with pain in childbirth goes back to the time when we were all deciding to walk upright. It's a tradeoff. The bones realign. The pelvis closes up somewhat. So you see, it's a very old story.

Like the stories of Heaven and Hell.

Mystics had visions of people in Hell and thought the punishment was eternal. But it's being shown to me now that all that agonizing burning is no more and no less than the generation of heat and power for the earth. Sin becomes a substance in the soul, thick, heavy, sticky, that burns like oil. Sin is necessary: it's what the earth machine runs on. And once all that sin burns off, the soul's light and free.

Psalms 49 again: "Why need I fear when evil times come? Only my own sins can ensnare me."

The night becomes gloomier than before. Denser clouds pass under the moon. The crickets seem to mourn, saying that we're all ensnared in our sins from the moment we're born. I catch sight of a vision I don't like. In the open space between Cabaña Supernatura and the smaller hut where Rufino and his family are sleeping, a semitransparent, glowing red devil is dancing in place. He has goat legs and he's grinning. He's not looking at me but I can tell he's



aware I'm looking at him.

I force myself to look away. I scold my mind for having conjured this hallucination.

"OK, he must be gone now," I think. But when I look back he's still dancing there. Damn. It's like Pata said—I drank yagé and a devil came. I look away again. Perhaps coincidentally, perhaps not, midway between the devil and me is a plant the Secoyas call *nuní*, which, Joaquín has told me, has the power to repel the Devil. This is oddly reassuring.

The next time I look, the apparition has vanished.

The clouds thin out again. The dark world undims. Joaquín wakes and begins to sing, the yagé's synesthetic properties converting his rich voice into insanely detailed, brilliantly colored abstract images.

He pauses and murmurs, "See, there they are." I open my eyes and look where he's pointing, the peak of the hut's roof. I'm delighted to see the calves and sandaled feet of three women: angels. They rise slowly through the ceiling and vanish, ascending to Heaven.

Joaquín sings again, then sleeps. I wonder what it was like for Dante to look into his imagination and see the contents of his poem. Did he experience himself as assembling it like a craftsman? Or did it come as a revelation?

Off to my right, I hear the mellifluous buzz of an approaching insect. The sound synestheses into a path of brightly colored rectangles that enters my vision from the right side. As it crosses my face, the sound-path splits apart and multiplies to portray something like a multicolored mosaic spacecraft, before narrowing again on the left side into a single path of rectangles and reaching away.

In the same instant a question pops into my head:

What makes the crow fly delirious with cunning?

I contemplate the persistent image of the mosaic spacecraft. And did the insect just drop that question on me? I whisper it over and over to memorize it. I remember a fairy tale collected by the Grimm brothers in which crows had visions of the future. That would make someone delirious with cunning.

Like Labaka.¹ He and Sister Arango must have been in cahoots with the Tagaeris. They knew they could ransom them with their lives. Typical Christian missionaries, valuing the next world more than this one. Cunning as crows, they walked into Heaven with open eyes. They didn't have children, which made it easier to die. They knew that if one wants to exercise influence over a piece of land, one can bleed into it. Their bodies were riddled with holes. Their blood drained into the ground. The earth drank their sacrifice and empowered their prayers. The oil companies stayed off the land.

Little by little, other lines congeal and a poem is born.

What makes the crow fly delirious with cunning?

With the catflash of a manyfingerted tornado?

*The world is a riddle
riddled with riddles.*

*Day creates, night destroys.
Night creates, day destroys.*

1. "In the Secret Place of Thunder," *Cenacle* | 84 | April 2013.

*We defend the forest with open arms.
Openly armed, we defend the forest.*

Off in the distance, howler monkeys roar their own endless poem. Nearby, a rooster calls out that dawn will come soon. The sleepers are stirring. I wrap up in my blanket to warm my shoulders, turn onto my right side, feel the sway of the hammock, touch the taut strings, recite the lines of the poem again so I'll remember it, go over the content of the night's waking dreams, and watch dawn ease into the forest.

A couple hours later, a guide brought seven French tourists to visit the shaman. They ranged in age from about 25 to 60. Still in my green tunic and smudged face paint, I arranged benches for everyone to sit on. The visitors' light skin and hair and their European features comforted me. "I haven't been around anyone but Secoyas for a couple weeks," I remarked in English. "It's nice to see some familiar faces." They smiled warmly. Joaquín smiled too.

Their guide had to go back down to the water to tinker with the canoe's motor, so I interpreted as they talked with Joaquín. A woman asked a question. I translated it into Spanish. Joaquín exclaimed, "Ah!" and answered a slightly different question. I translated his response into English without comment. "No," she said, "I meant . . ." and repeated her question. I translated her words into Spanish for Joaquín again. He said "Ah!" again and answered a similar but still different question. His discourse interspersed with my translations, he went on at such length and in such detail that the woman forgot her original question.

In the afterglow of the yagé, the multicolored beaded band of the uncucui's crown was splendorous. Like something the wiñawai might wear, like the brilliant skin of the rainbow serpent, like celestial static. A translation into beads of some high energy that went through his mind while he was making it. A nano-version of the Crown of God.

Forcing my gaze away from the crown, I noticed the oldest tourist eyeing me critically. The man clearly suspected Joaquín and I were somewhat under the influence of this wonder drug we were touting. I looked him in the eye and nodded yes before translating Joaquín's latest comment: "In the old days during the summertime of August, September, and October, people would pack their finest clothes and ceremonial gear and trek for weeks to come to the yagé lodge for healing and visions. Then the clay trumpet would sound to announce that the ceremony was going to begin." The tourists were fascinated by Joaquín's account of the tradition. The youngest looked like he would have liked to stay with us and drink.

In the late afternoon, as we were weeding the patio garden, Joaquín remarked, "The Devil was here last night, wasn't he?"

My jaw dropped. "I guess so."

"He was dancing, right over there, wasn't he?"

"I guess so," I repeated, stunned.

He seemed to have seen just the same image as I had, but his interpretation differed slightly. I'd understood the figure as "a devil," whereas he'd called it "the Devil."

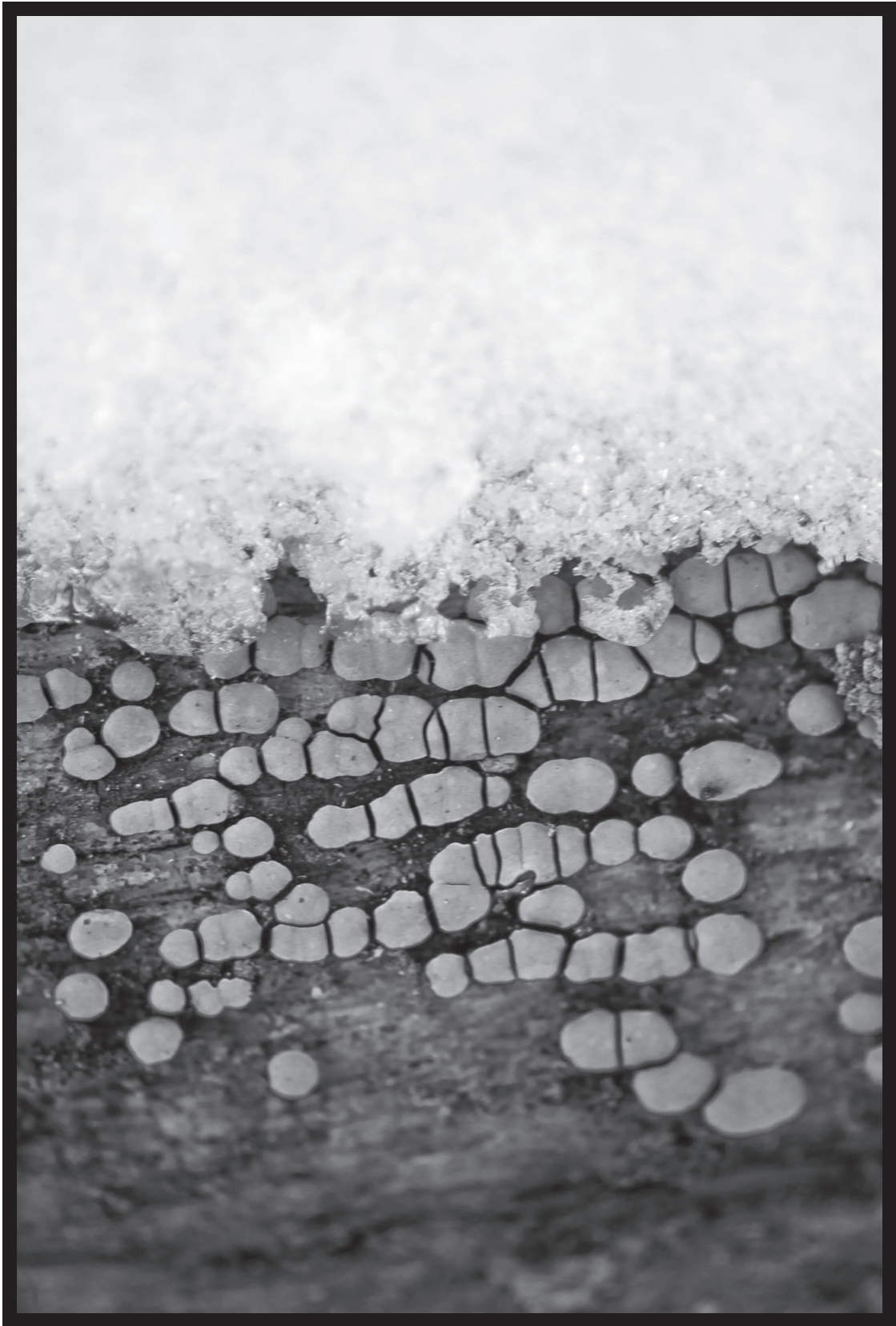
In any case, the episode reinforced my conviction that the energies we were working with were real. It was impossible for me to believe that Joaquín hadn't somehow seen the same vision that I'd seen. And I wanted to learn how he'd done it.

* * * * *

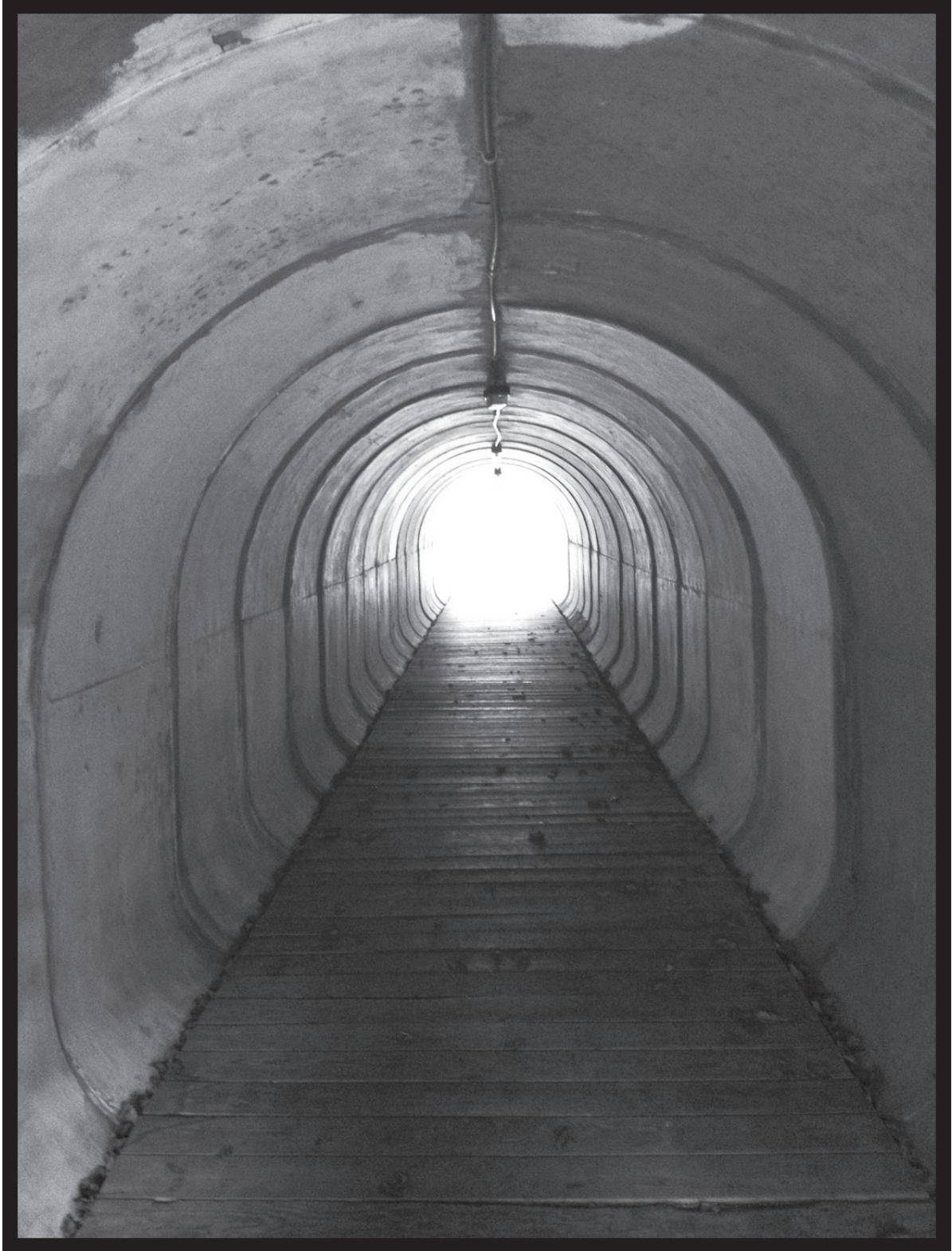














Paleo Redemption

[Travel Journal]

Continued from Cenacle | 89 | June 2014

8 – Bones

We set into the gulch; at first the streambed is flat, but quickly steepens increasingly. Soon it is a jumble of boulders and ledges. Some ledges are chest-high and the mud walls near vertical. You can reach out and touch both sides. It is like being the meat in a sandwich. The hairy sausage dog doesn't have a chance. It can only peer up in wonderment at what we are asking it to climb. Acceding to its diminutive ability, I pick up the dog tube and re-perch it on the next ledge. Often it just sits there in protest, even though there is five feet of clear clambering.

"Move it, Ricardo," I say. Not willing to carry the blob all the way.

"Her name is Winnie," my sister says.

"Ya mean like Winnie-the-Poo?"

"Yes. Like that."

"Come on, Winston. Move your fat ass." I give the dog a small whack on the ass and it lunges forward with some effort. It wants to please, but is built more like a little hippo than a goat—which the landscape requires.

Now the knife cut in the earth gets really steep. The scrambling is almost vertical. The gulch a broken ladder, the walls of clay at 80 degrees. Lauri and I cut steps in the wall with rock picks and boost Winnie from perch to perch. The thing must be scared shitless, as it sits without complaint on what it can barely get its feet on. After a sweaty 20-minute-and-100-foot ascent, the hill flattens a little with a high bench. The back of the flat is a vertical cliff of another 300 feet, gigantic blocks of sandstone looming on top, poised to smash us like bugs should they tumble.

"It's around here somewhere," Lauri says.

"What's it look like again?"

"Bones. Big bones."

"Like a big amount? Or big like a basketball?"

"Big."

"And where did you say it was?"

"It's around here. Somewhere. I think?"

"You think? Ya mean this might not be the draw?"

"It looks like the same one. Not sure."

"They all look the same. We just scrambled up 300 feet and you're not sure?" There I go. Being the asshole again. *What the fuck's wrong with me?* This place is fantastic, bones or no

bones. A view out over a primeval landscape, curious stones scattered all around. The usual dribble of unknown dino parts sprinkled between gargantuan fallen blocks of rock. What's with my angst? Do I have a glandular problem? I try to erase my mind by scrambling over some crumbly slope with marble-sized gravel on it. The kind that makes you slip and tumble 50 feet, crashing your head. I concentrate on what my head would look like all smashed in, blood mixing with the lithified colors here, the fine panic it would put my sister in.

I am calmed a little. So then I sit. What the hell. We can't find the bones. *I give up. Forget it.* Below me Lauri is fussing in her pack and comforting the traumatized dog. I breathe the endless air. Soak in the sun. Drift away in my mind.

"Oh my god! Here it is! I found it! I found it!" Lauri cries from below. She doesn't seem to have moved much. How is this possible? Oh me of little faith. I shame myself with my giving up. My topographic orthographical problem.

"Ya got it!? Ya found it? Cool. I'm coming down." I scramble down. Now slipping and catching myself as I imagined. When I get to her, I see the bones. They are just out of sight behind a small mud ridge. Hiding in plain sight, seen if only you have the proper angle. They are fantastic. Five vertebra half in the hill. Each as big as a softball. Perfectly aligned. We cut steps in the nearby mud to get our faces closer. Whose spine is this? Three times the size of a cow spine—this creature must have been 20 feet long at least.

We pick at it with tiny tools, knocking off obvious rubble. Lovingly sweep it with a paintbrush. Lauri gets out the notebook and I read her off GPS coordinates and elevation. She also makes some notes as to the condition, mud type, and other environmental things. I take a dozen pictures.

"What now? What are we gonna do?" I ask.

"We have to leave it," she says.

"Huh? I can't dig this puppy out?"



Courtesy of Charlie Beyer

"No. It would screw up the alignment. We have to ask the paleo guys what to do."

"I know what to do. We steal it. This is a beauty."

"No. The right way to do it is that we cover this side in plaster. Then when that dries, we dig out the back and plaster the other side. I'm gonna ask the paleo guys for permission to retrieve this."

"That will be awesome. I'll help you. Totally. What happens after we retrieve it?"

"Goes to the museum."

"Yeah. What then?"

"Goes into the basement."

"The basement? This beauty? Ya mean it goes into a box and just sits there forever?"

"Yep."

"Shit. That's a crime." I want this for my mantle. If I had one. This is cooler than any safari head anybody ever brought back from Africa. We sit and pick at it some more, like we were on the overtime clock painting Marilyn Monroe's fingernails. The dog is sprawled in the shade of a boulder. Eventually we give a big sigh and decide to work our way back down the hill by a different route.

The way down is not as bad as the way up. The hairy sausage can even maneuver most of it. Along the way we find more scattered bones, but nothing of the magnitude above. A fossil palm leaf lies in our path. Then perfect spheres an inch across. I break one of these open and find that it is composed of pyrite. How strange. I pocket some for later show-and-tell. Back on the valley floor, I declare that it would be easier traveling to go to the main wash and walk its course. We head across the flat—scrub grass, quartz cobbles, and stunted pines. Wilfred decides to have a sit-down strike. The puny legs will move no more. He-she has been favoring the feet, walking like a cat does in shallow water.

"Come on, Winnie. Come on!" my sister coaxes.

"Move your fuzzy ass, dog," I say. Nothing happens. The thing has bonded to the ground. Looking at its feet, we can see why. The usual black dog foot is worn down to pink. Every step must hurt like hell. I have pity. Sister has pity. Can't expect the cripple to hike like this. It's some miles back yet. I carry it like a quarterback going for the goal until we get to the main dry river channel. This looks nice and flat. Soft sand. Put the creature down and we walk a hundred feet. Then it stops again. Rooted. No baby talk stirs it. It has a "fuck you" look to it.

I tie my puny pack onto my sister's larger one and hoist the dog up onto my shoulders.



Courtesy of Charlie Beyer

Being a tube affair, it fits fairly well, like a mink stole, with me holding its feet in front. This is like the aborigine hauling the gazelle kill back to camp. The animal doesn't struggle a bit. When I have to shift its weight because the 40 pounds are digging into me somewhere, the doggie clavicle in my neck, it adjusts like it's riding a motorcycle on a curvy road. Out of the corner of my eye, I can see what looks like a huge shit-eating grin. In a half a mile, we come across the other four prospectors. Kat erupts in laughter, myself now the focus of her snarky attitude, but she quickly shifts to sympathetic baby talk—to the animal.

Hey, honey. I'm the one suffering under the load. Where's my baby talk?

I unload my sister's bigger pack into my smaller one, giving that to her to carry. The pampered canine is stuffed vertically into the designer backpack, 6-liter, 600-dollar job. Fits pretty well. Just its head bugging out, a look of absolute contentment. In this fashion, we hike the miles back. The Fab Four are speedy, waiting irritably for Lauri and me every quarter mile. The last three-quarter's mile climb up the hill, we are abandoned to our torpid pace, and that's fine with us. Let the buggers charge ahead. At last back to the main camp at sunset—the tents, the trucks, a cold beer, and a cheerful dog released.

That evening, a convoy of three trucks arrives, disgorging the main contingent of paleo scientists and volunteers. Much unloading of supplies, mostly hot dogs and beer. The dozens scatter into the dark, blunderingly setting up their tents with LED lights. Little flashes of color in the distance, like blinking Christmas lights. More beers are swilled around the fire by the cook tents, then an exhausted early turn in for travelers and hikers alike.

9 – Lost Valley

I sleep like a warm loaf of bread. My tiny pedestrian bubble is cramped-cozy, piled as I am under wool blankets and sleeping bags. I wake late, well past the dog barking and the mutterings of stirring others. Leaving everything in a tangled heap, I head to the central fire and the assembled masses. Breakfast is being made by a huge man—Rolph the Rape. A fussy gray-haired lady is helping him, frying a massive skillet of bacon, stirring a steaming slop of potatoes, tomatoes, and who knows what. Little bits of unidentified matter rise and fall in the concoction.

The crowd around the smoky fire numbers near 20, and they all seem to be about that age. All are dressed in the latest LL Bean fashions, some in aviator glasses whose dark mirrors reflect the morning sun. Why are none helping these older people with the gigantic breakfast? Is the privilege of youth to be served by their Mama while they grumble over trivialities? I am ashamed to be around them and go to offer my services to the cooks, with an ulterior motive of stealing some coffee. There is some. The dregs of a two-gallon pot of cowboy coffee. I use the cup that was the ladle and pour the last of it. Its viscosity approaches sewage sludge, thickened as it is with the grounds. But I don't care. These people have graciously made it for me and the Starbucks crowd. It's bitter and a little crunchy, rather fun, sure to blast me with a wake-up jolt. I set to work again at my craft, breaking eggs. The old lady stirs them with some sand and twigs in another great pan, the yellow mess of three dozen hardening to crumbles. The big Rolph pushes into the entitled fire circle, the skinnies falling away from him like so many tall reeds before a buffalo. In the softest voice, almost as though he were on the verge of tears, he says, "Breakfast is ready." Then he turns back to his duty, leaving a hole rent in the ring. I notice that the most lazy languid are the first to rush to the chow line. They should be fed last I think, if at all.



Courtesy of Charlie Beyer

Rolph the Rape is the camp commander. Imposing in size without question, but with a soft sorrowful personality about him that's perpendicular to his presence. To be near him is to want to hug him in consolation. I would, but I don't know him from sidewalk spit. It is nice to see someone of depth here, oddly a reflection of who I have become: mysterious, dark, big, beckoning. I am comforted that my angst cannot be anywhere as intense as what churns within this massive man.

Rolph is 6-foot-2 or thereabouts. He is fat and dressed shabby. Another thing we have in common. Somewhere in his fifties, he still has color in his hair although, by his manner, you would expect him to be silvered. Paleo people are people with a past. They are strugglers in the world of business, of Americana families, of lost love, of academia. In each area of their lives are stories of triumph and despair, great climbs to power, great falls into the abyss. The 300 pounds of Rolph is such a man.

Brilliant in his youth, a graduate from college in physics at 16 with an obsession for homemade fireworks. On the night he received news of his acceptance to the graduate program at Yale, he set off a concoction atop the hill of his hometown, blowing out half the windows of sleepy Main Street. The FBI could find no explosive residue to create a case against him, finally concluding that the device was a small fission reaction made from Americium extracted out of smoke detectors.

Rolph graduated with honors, writing a small book on the refining of common radioactive materials in the environment. The Atomic Energy Commission recruited him—landing him in Hanford, Washington, the home of the atomic bomb. Now rich with a huge government salary, it was not long before he was married to one of the many bar bimbos who lurk the area to ensnare his caliber—an American equivalent of a Filipino mail-order bride, escaping poverty and mobile-wide existence.

A number of years go by, with Rolph entering deeper and deeper into the politics of nuclear waste. His recommendations to consolidate open ponds of irradiating waste-water go ignored. Even after two or three overflow incidents, dumping the high-level uranium into the river, upstream of the unaware town he and his lovely bride reside in.

He sees other violations, such as spent fuel pellets being buried behind the buildings. He brings these issues to the director and is assured that something will be done. More solid radioactives are buried obviously in the next week. This time, he threatens the director that he will go to the local newspaper. Again, he is assured of quick action.

The next night, as he gets off shift, he is stopped at the security gate. The Geiger counter is screaming off the scale. A furious search of his vehicle finds a small box of the fuel pellets being smuggled out. Rolph is arrested as a terrorist with intent to sell to the Iraqis. His cries of innocence and ignorance go unheeded.

Locked in a military prison on the nuclear "Reservation," he works out a compromise with the director—his resignation on interoffice molestation charges in exchange for silence. It is this, or espionage charges, which will lead to his execution. When he returns to his happy home (with the water glowing in the toilet bowl), he finds his wife in bed with two men.

She is outraged that he has forced her into this condition—his abandonment, his lack of respect, the paltry \$100,000 credit limit. She refuses to be treated in such a manner anymore and files for divorce. Her case is clear: the fact that he's fired for womanizing, his authority problem, her near-starvation living conditions, the inability to procure new carpeting, and his obvious irradiation problem that prevents her from bringing a beautiful Christian child into the world.

The court is overwhelmed in her innocent favor over the evil mad scientist. The house, the bank account, the alimony—all goes to the faithful wife.

Rolph wanders the western states until his car breaks down in Sacramento. Living in a mission house there for a while, then hitchhiking to the streets of San Francisco, he finds a new life as a wino, his bed a trench coat stuffed with newspapers, his dinner a pint of muscatel wine. His confederates around him are accountants, ex-movie stars, and the retarded. Together they commiserate about the cruelty of the world, the evil that lurks in the hearts of women. Their cardboard signs read: *Veteran. Please help. God Bless*—as they pathetically hold out the grimy Styrofoam cup. Rolph's sign says: *Will calculate atomic masses. God Damn*. His cup is a half of an earth globe he found in the school dumpster. Because San Francisco is a smart community, at the end of the day Rolph's half world is full of dollars.

One day a well-dressed man, light stepping, long hair and a mustache under a cowboy hat, stops in curiosity before him. Takes a 20-dollar bill from his wallet. "Tell me a story," he says. Rolph does—flamboyantly—to the great fascination of his audience. The fellow's name is Red Malcom, discoverer of the Tyrannosaurus Sue. Red offers Rolph a field chemist's job in the Montana dinosaur digs.

And so Rolph goes, filling his lungs with pure air, his belly with good food, his mind with clear scientific thoughts. At the end of the season, he attends the university in Billings in the discipline of paleontology. In a few years, Rolph has another master's degree, and he becomes a tramp bone-dresser in a dozen museum collections between Chicago and Los Angeles.

Eventually he lands in Denver as an adjunct curator, in charge of ten 20-year-old volunteer girls. The girls are geeky and partially ugly, but this suits him just fine. His status and mass make the virgins easy prey to this dinosaur. His affairs become legendary. His name becomes common vernacular, Rolph the Rape. Although this is a cruel moniker—for he is a gentle horn dog—it gives the little nerdettes the most attention they've ever had in their lives.

10 – The Road

The sun is at a respectable angle now after breakfast, the frost flakes skittered like scared mice, first under the trees, then vanishing altogether. Rolph pushes into the circle of twenty-somethings as a rhinoceros would into a tent. In a barely discernible voice he whispers: “We’re just going to do a little clean-up here and then load some tools and fix the road.” I would not have been able to hear him if I hadn’t been three feet away, but I don’t know what it means anyway. The last part—“fix the road”—is said so apologetically you’d think he was asking everyone for 20 dollars for breakfast. His head is down, three chins against his chest, his eyes squinted shut, the verge of tears.

The twenty-somethings are being boring. No raised voices. They seem still mostly asleep or drugged. I wander back to my tent set up to shake out some dust, zip up before flies move in. Presently, I hear a great clanging out on the road. A big truck is started. The huge vehicle lumbers by brimming with people and shovels. I climb on the moving machine like a hobo jumping a boxcar. After a half-mile of teeth-rattling ruts and road slopes to 40 degrees, we stop at one place where the road is washed half through.

Rolph gets out and lights a cigarette. “Fill this,” he whispers. There is no instruction as to how to do it. Rolph has a hoe that he seems very familiar with. He begins to lightly scratch the ground beside the trench. A skinny fellow shovels up the loosened dirt and sprinkles it into the trench. Rolph’s cigarette dangles from his lips making a cloud of smoke around his head. Others use shovels to dig into the road cut and toss more dirt in. I find boulders near by and roll them to the road slash. Others take a cue from this and also collect rocks for the hole. The shovelers bury them.

Rolph carries the hoe like a cane now and uses his weight to pack the dirt. “Keep it coming,” he whispers to no one in particular. He dramatically throws in his cigarette butt as though this was the secret cement. Another is lit immediately. Because there are not enough shovels, a half-dozen just stand around doing nothing. Not even packing. True to the smoking boss’s introverted management style, he murmurs: “shovelers, switch.” The loungers take their turns at the spade. The laziest among them manage to stay out of the hand-off and remain helpful observers. Eventually a few cubic yards of rocks and dirt are packed in the trench, and we proceed to the next crevasse.

A few hours, and three more of these road wash outs, Rolph announces that we are done. There is one very flabby young lady who has done nothing whatsoever. I think she loaded Rolph’s hoe into the truck. She also smokes a lot of cigarettes and stands with one hip cocked as close as she can to the big boss. Her shirt has its tails tied just under her watery breasts. Flab projects a measurable three inches around the belt line. The overall effect is that of a weakly-filled water balloon. The slightest movement sets the entire tire jiggling out of control. The exposed belly fat, intended to be a sexual attractant, has the opposite effect. The rumor is that she has been Rolph’s bed companion on previous expeditions but now there is more of her than ever before. Even the shy bovine boss who would settle for a similar beast has gag factor #7. She can’t screw her way out of work this year.

We roll back into camp, careening from side to side, all of us standing in the back, a tall building in a slow motion earthquake. There is big excitement at the camp. Here Dan and JonJon have appeared out of the hills. They have hiked here from eight miles away and

a thousand feet higher. They are both major curators back at the museum, lieutenants here. Another paleo guy, Ted, is the official commander of these wilderness wanderers. He is still out there in the deep field somewhere. Big Rolph quickly disappears into a tent with these leaders, his haunch easily entering while the other two lackeys must stoop.

The lieutenants emerge within 15 minutes and converse quickly with a multitude of subordinates. Dan comes over and gives me a proper uncle greeting. I feel warmed inside. He looks fantastic, tall, ruddy, handsome, energetic. He says everything nicely, almost annoyingly positive.

“Damn, Dan. I heard you hiked out of the helicopter drop this morn,” I say.

“Yeah. We started at 3:30 in the morning in a snowstorm. It was beautiful.”

“How long did it take you?”

“Not long. Only ten hours.”

“You must be dog tired.” I’m thinking I’d be in the hospital after a ten-hour hike.

“Oh no. Never better. You look fantastic, Uncle Charlie. So glad you could make it.”

Damn. What a wonderful liar. I look like shit. Crappy clothes, pudgy, ratty hair. Where did this boy learn to talk like that?

JonJon stands erect, facing the sun. He is dark with black close-cropped beard and hair. He has a perpetual grin, as though he had just played a fine practical joke. His teeth are straight and white, gleaming on the background of the coal hair face. Black-mirrored aviator glasses finish the erudite aloof impression. JonJon wears a skin-tight short sleeve shirt of two-paneled color. It appears to be a wetsuit top although the nearest water is 500 miles away. His physique is perfect, abdominal muscles rippling beneath the thin scuba gear. He has every appearance of a Greek god who just stepped off the pedestal. I want to warn him about the blubber job on the hunt for the likes of him. He is a living estrogen attractant.

“We’re going to Lost Valley, Uncle Charlie. Want to come with us? Mom’s coming,” asks Nephew Dan.

“Yeah. Yeah, I want to go. Count me in,” I say.

“Great. Great. That’s wonderful. Be ready in an hour,” declares Dan as he turns to rush off elsewhere.

“OK. Will do.” This is the big banana. This is what this expedition is all about. The Lost Valley. The place that’s never been explored. The place where only the elite are invited to go. The land of infinite discovery. Besides, I’m petrified at the thought of being left behind with strangers. I have to go with the nephew and sister or I’ll crap my pants in social fear. Feeling a little loose at the thought of it, I hurry off to pack my stuff into a carry-able load. It’s a three-mile hike into the place over rough terrain.

11 – The Pack

“Do you need any help?” bellows Cathy in a snarky sort of voice that says she really doesn’t want to help, only intimidate me into moving faster.

“No. I’m OK. Thanks, though,” I reply.

“Are you going to be ready?” she calls back as I hurry up the hill to my bivouac.

“Yeah. Yeah. I’ll be ready.” And what the fuck if I’m not ready? Is this busybody bitch going to prevent me from coming with her petty office political power? Of course I’ll be ready even if I have my pants half on.

My camping style is tuned to the truck. Typically I pack a 55-gallon drum with bedding, sufficient to survive a small squad in a polar ice storm. In total, it weighs over 150 pounds and is rolled to its destination before unloading. Other things are carried in the truck as well: 200 pounds of kitchen crap and food, a 100-pound water pump, various hoses, shovels, picks, rakes, steel bars—and then some sluice boxes and assorted mining equip (often lifted in with a hoist), and not to forget a generator for good measure. I'd need 40 African porters if it was ever needed to hike all this junk in somewhere.

In the interest of lightweight efficiency, I bought a cheap three-man tent at Wal-Mart. It is ultra-light, as it says on the package. Just a mere 25 pounds. The material is made of polymer saturated iron wood shavings stolen from the Philippines and manufactured in China. Its life span is expected to last through two good rain storms or one interaction with a magnet before it turns to dust. Its three-man capacity is for those tiny brown individuals not exceeding four feet in length and 73 pounds. My body makes up about 4.7 of these midgets. I can only fit in the Chinese tent diagonally. When I get the barrel unloaded in there, the mass of bedding curls halfway up the walls, making a knot hole that I slip into like a hotdog into a bun. Warm as hell if I can survive the smothering.

But now my nest must be broken apart. What is the minimum I can keep the ice out of my bones with? If I had a couple of bears brimming with hot hair, I could just hike my bedding bears in, sleep in the nude, hope my balls don't get clawed off from some midnight flea scratching. But no bears—no balls.

The two Hudson's Bay blankets are must-haves. Together they only weigh 30 pounds. Many an explorer has imbedded himself in a glacier with these and reported later to the Royal Geographical Society. Worked for them—I may make it. But I gotta have my little blue foam pads that don't really weigh more than five pounds but are the volume of a small Spanish cannon. Actually need the dog-eaten Boy Scout sleeping bag. Not sure if the dog ate the Boy Scout out of it—the blood stains might be from something else. Not accounting for the weight of the blood, that's only another 10 pounds. Now if I wear long johns, thick pants, two shirts, a sweater, and my mega construction jacket, I might make it through a zero night.

Screw the yuppie trail-hiking boots. The ones I have are like an imitation Rolex anyway, all appearance. No claims to arch support or cliff climbing. So the hell with that. It's tennis shoes for these peds. Going more the Indian moccasin way. Now to load everything into the on-sale yuppie backpack. Six liters, the pimply sales man assured me. At the time, it looked big enough to carry two footballs, but for me it's all about the frame.

My paternal training in backpacking was the forced march through coastal swamps in the dead of night. Our equipment was supplied by Andy's Army Surplus that occupied an abandoned can factory in the industrial area. My father would carefully select what is called a "buckboard." I think an entire buck could be strapped on. The thing was essentially a piece of plywood with two shoulder slicing straps. All around the perimeter were about 2000 hooks, to which no less than 100 feet of manila rope would be entwined, compressing a massive bulging load no smaller than a Volkswagen bug. Under this crushing mound, my father would attach my puny body, point me down an overgrown trail, and watch with glee as the leaden beetle struggled into the brush. What I face now has to be dirt-easy compared to that.

The two blankets are rolled so tightly they could chip concrete when dropped, but they would not fit into the six-liter yuppie pack. Thus the whole bag thing is worthless. I barely got my jacket into it. This means that everything has to be tied on. There's no goddamned hooks

on this modern technology. Like the new phones that you can't get your finger in the number hole. I have to slice holes in the sides of the pack to wrap my hemp rope through the frame. Get the blankets lashed to the top, then the tent and bloody body bag beneath. On that the extra daypack, the foam, some random clothes. I've almost used up my 200 feet of rope, and the new pack is slashed all to hell. I'm back to beetle mode with a four-foot projection off my spine. Try to lift the Volkswagen. Impossible. 80 pounds. I can hear whoops of readiness from the twenty-somethings. Sweating, I drag the pack monstrosity down to the edge of the road. This thing should have wheels.

Sad-faced Rolph comes along with a truck. The REI hikers are all standing in the back. He will take us a few miles down the road to the leap-off point. The start of the trail into the Lost Valley. I am puffing and wheezing by the time I reach the truck. I can barely lift my pack into the back, trying instead to roll it up the side. Cathy sits with her face rigid in the other direction, her nose up, denying to give to this tiny struggle any of her well-organized attention. Finally her vertically enhanced husband reaches a lanky arm over the side and pulls my pack in. The truck starts to move and I must clamber over the tailgate with the truck in motion, like the wounded bandit escaping on the back of his buddy's horse.

In a half a dozen miles Rolph stops at a nondescript gully. The twenty-somethings pile out and take up an oddly paused attitude, all pulling out their transparent-colored Nalgene bottles. With these they make a great show of drinking the water. As if choreographed, they then all unwrap some two-dollar energy bars, high carb with peanut butter and cranberries. The plastic flashes in the sun, false aluminum foil festooned with health messages. No Nestle's chocolate bars. Lauri performs the ritual in her style, as though modeling her perfect hiking clothes. I have a half a bottle of stale Wal-Mart water, but choose to save it. I drop the tailgate and haul my massive pack out that thuds to the ground. All the others have some sort of feather weight loads, their 20-below sleeping bags squashing down to the size of a cigarette package, the tent hardly bigger than a bible. Everything neatly packed and contained all their straps and snaps, tidy, in semi-neon colors like the first day of elementary school.

As they chew their caloric cud, I drag my dead load over to a small hill and prop the thing up vertically. Holding the thing over my back with one hand, I wiggle under the massive bundle and struggle my arms into the straps. The youths carefully stow their candy wrappers and effortlessly flip the glowing packs onto their perfectly sweat-free recyclable sustainable designer backs. Can't be more than 10 pounds each. I cinch down my multi-strap pack, pulling the wrong lines, cutting off the little blood flow remaining. As the twenty-somethings launch up the gully with light steps, bouncing on their toes as a 7-year-old might do, I'm pinned to the ground, gripped to the overturned mass. I'm a Galapagos turtle waiting helplessly for a sailor or wild animal to feast on my exposed soft belly.

My sister kindly comes over to stand on my feet, hauling me to a wobbly standing position. She seems a little embarrassed of her brother's pathetic condition, like a trip to the mall with the retarded sibling. "Are you all right back there?" ingeniously shouts back the compulsive Cathy as she disappears with the bouncing others—knowing that I am not. The dog barks and whines, wanting all of us to maintain a tight herd for her instinctual compulsion.

12 – The Trail

With slow tottering steps I follow the vanishing squad. My sister stays with me, graciously stepping along effortlessly beside. The “trail” is a three-foot wide creek bottom with 10-foot sides. This soon narrows to two-feet or less. In a half-mile we break off of the gulch and clamber up a pinyon pine slope. I am sweating like a vandalized New York fire hydrant. The stubby-legged dog does not race ahead—it’s all it can do to keep up. Scrambling up to an intermediate ridge, the twenty-somethings are all waiting, drinking their Nalgene from the glowing colored bottles. I can sense their magnanimous attitude, waiting for the aged slowpokes. So kind of them, although I could give a goddamn. “How are you doing back there, Charlie? Are you alright?” asks the bureaucrat bitch. Her tone is so condescending, I want to either barf or beat her with a stick. “I’m fine. Just a little slower,” I say. This could be because I’m out of shape, 40 years older, or because my pack weighs four times what theirs is. The bouncy bureaucrat takes these words as a call to proceed and launches off up the hill with her dutiful entourage in tow. This happens just as I near them, the usual polite wait of indifference. Naturally, this leaves no time for our own rest, but instead a dash to keep up. Uphill. I don’t think so.

In another 15 minutes of uphill climbing, weaving through the stubby trees, we reach the ridge where the twentys are waiting. Bored. My pack is lopsided, the bedding slobbered to one side from snagging on trees. The land falls away abruptly ahead, dropping a thousand feet in a nearly vertical slope. I’m going to fucking rest. The office jerks can blaze on or leap off the cliff. I could give a shit. The self-proclaimed leader bitch is rambling on and on about the features of the “trail,” which is really no more than a route.

“See over there? That’s Girlfriend Hill. We can go around it or over it. I’m going to the top. The view of Lost Valley is magnificent. Make sure your camera is working properly and that dust is not covering the lens.” *Blah, blah, blah*, she misses no irrelevant detail. “So you can go up Girlfriend Hill or go around it.” *Didn’t she just say this? Where’s the part about stuffing the view up your ass?*

“Are you alright?” she says to me in a nasal insincere tone. I’m only soaked in sweat and panting like a dog chasing a rabbit. Now I’m pissed. I growl back, “Do I look alright? Are *you* alright?” I’m thinking “in spite of your control problem. That must really shortchange your husband’s sex life.” Her tall Abe Lincoln husband is staring motionless, his cow eyes fixed into space, the bearded mouth slightly agape. Does he have teeth? I wonder. Obviously not in this marriage. I can see the petty bureaucrat is slightly peeved, her false concern rebuked, unused to being talked back to. The jocks launch off again in long strides, following the queen over the hill, as if there is not enough view already to bury us in this universe. I’m still gasping for breath with the dog. I worry the hairy punk will use up some of my air but there seems to be a sufficient supply all around. Considerable more than there is ground. My sister is dry and calm. Pressed even, as though she’s posing for an LL Bean commercial.

Lauri, the dog, and I take the low route around the hill, a butte really in geologic vernacular, which at first is a massive flat stone, an easy traverse, but soon turns into hard mud walls. I scramble up with my anger at the bureaucrat, but I can hear Lauri swearing below, struggling for footing, cursing the incapable dog. We reconvene with the politically correct pack on the ridge on the far side—they have again been waiting and again launch off as we approach.

From here there is a mile of steep descent, which the dog has much trepidation about. The poor thing is dreadfully malformed for this treacherous slope angle. Its balance is all off, having three-quarters of its mass in the south end—threatening to accelerate past its head, turning it into a furry ball plummeting down the slope. It knows this even without a formal education in physics. We cut foot-holds on occasion in the gray clay, handing the dog between us. Some parts of the route are knife-edges, the 70-degree precipices falling away 500 feet on either side. I think this land is fantastic. Stripes of yellow and purple run wild into the vista, as though we were walking on the back of some massive sleeping dinosaur.

Eventually we slip down to a flat mile square where the speedos are waiting again. Bored again, religiously sipping their Nalgene bottles. The control freak doesn't ask how I am, to my relief. If she did, I'd have to say something really nasty. How these city rats can be so indifferent to their surroundings here, I wonder. Must be some kind of hiking cool thing—"been there done that" prowess—or maybe cyber poisoning. Abe Lincoln is ridged, jaw still agape, frozen until the next command from his mistress. Bone shards litter the ground. Fossilized geologic formations rise wildly out of the surroundings like small bears sneaking up on us. Each containing some paleolithic mystery.

13 – The Fool Killer

Ahead is easy walking for a mile across the barren sandstone. A small forest of pine is at its distant edge. The dog and I plod along, keeping up with the pack with every leaden step. As we enter the wooded zone, Dave suddenly appears out of the trees with his long strides. He is lightly dressed, only carrying a 15-pound pick over his shoulder. If I didn't know him as my nephew, I'd be terrified. What is he doing out here in apparent nowhere? He has a slightly dazed appearance, as you would expect a Fool Killer to look.

The Fool Killer, as the story goes, was a 6-foot-4-inch giant such as Dave is. The Fool Killer lived in the swamp towns of Louisiana, and would prowl about in the dark mists of the evenings, his scowling face occasionally illuminated by flames of swamp gas. He carried a huge club with which he would beat his victims to a bloody pulp, distributing justice to the imagined criminals of weak mind or character.

"What are you doing out here, Dave?" He is slow to answer.

"Prospecting," he finally declares. "This is the shit forest. *Hunna hunna*," he half laughs.

"Why do you call it that, Dave?"

"*Hunna hunna*. This is where everybody takes a *dump*. *Hunna hunna*." He seems particularly excited at this declaration.

"OK, Dave, if you say so." Rather scatologically inclined, I think.

To the dog's delight, he joins our pack. Soon we emerge on the other side of the trees and are confronted with a small cliff ahead, dropping abruptly ten feet to a 75-degree slope. The bureaucrat changes her running tour guide monologue, none of which is about crapping in the woods, to Dave's disappointment.

She turns to address me. "Now be careful climbing down between these rocks. All handholds are not good handholds. When you reach the slope below, make sure your footing is secure and walk in diagonals along the hill." *Blah, blah, blah . . .* I say nothing but glower with my eyes. What a condescending idiot. *I've been clambering about in the wilds about fifty more years than you have, sweetie. You'd crap your spandex if you'd been where I have, clinging to*

cliffs, swept over waterfalls. Three nights in a Guatemalan hostel endorsed by Lonely Planet doesn't qualify you as the Lara Croft of adventure. I could clamber down this blind with a broken leg . . . carrying your dead body.

At the bottom, their pace doubles, for we are close to our base camp destination. The horses return to the barn, eager for hay. In their case, beer. The Nalgene water must have lost its iconic appeal. My Fool Killer nephew hangs back with his mother and me, graciously carrying my pack. He shoulders it easily with one strap, as though it was a woman's purse. I feel as though I'm about to float off the ground, the compression to the earth relieved. I carry the pick. Now I'm the Fool Killer, though of diminutive size. Where's that mouthy bitch now so I can dispense some justice?

14 – Base Camp

The camp is almost unnoticeable. A big fire pit. Some tables and coolers amid a cluster of bristlecone pines. The big dry river wash beside it. The bottom of Lost Valley.

A few polite greetings are exchanged between we travelers and residents who are there already. A small but good-looking lady named Kitty greets us with a winning smile. She is an autopsy professor at Princeton, but wants to be a paleo person. Be part of the living world but still study the dead. Fossilized dead. Here is Ted, an established paleo expert who has transferred his loyalty from the Salt Lake Museum to be part of the Denver Museum team. This is where the great research is happening. He looks like he crawled out of a dumpster. All one color of brown dirt. All he needs is a few teeth knocked out and a good right hand grip on a wine bottle to complete the picture. The gossip is that he's brilliant. Beautiful JonJon is there, erect, spotless in his skin-tight bi-colored wet suit. His specialty is paleo crocodiles. In a lithe way, he resembles them. Dan (my other nephew) is the resident paleobotanist. There is no leaf or fern he does not know—stretching back to the beginning of time. His parallel discoveries date the bones and tell of the ecology the dinos lived in. Then there are an assortment of new twenty-something volunteers who don't know a dinosaur from a plastic bottle. To them this rustic camping is likely their first time overnight "outside" without the protective shell of a Winnebago.

Ted is the camp commander. Although new to the Denver Museum staff, he has been scavenging these hills and canyons for fourteen years in search of a truly significant find. Whole dinosaurs. As many as can be found. He has found nothing but shards and rubble to date. A middle-aged stout man, thick and solid with questionable hygiene. As it is with the interesting, this paleo man has a past. Ted was reportedly raised on some frozen plain in Manitoba. He fled when young to the warmth and life of the urban centers in the south. The States, he calls it. In time he became a revered paleontologist, working for many years with the Museum of Salt Lake City. He jumped ship to join the Denver Museum because that's where the new bright paleo people were. That's where the money and exciting field-work is. That's why he's here. This is what he tells everyone.

Although not particularly handsome, he has an air of mischievousness. He has never married but always has a girlfriend. A different one every time someone sees him. His philosophy is that the life of a bee is short, and one must visit as many flowers as possible. But he has a shy way, as people do that come from the far north, and a strange way of looking at you sideways. A sort of unnerving stare out of the corner of his eyes. Maybe that's what makes

this dumpy Canadian so attractive to women.

Dusk approaches, probably because I was so slow on the trail. But maybe it would have happened anyway. We hikers scatter within a quarter-mile radius to set up our private sleeping camps. I find a nice place littered with archeology, 100-year old rusted milk cans and Indian arrowhead chips among them. I tell myself a story of a long ago cattle rustlers' camp that was slaughtered by the Indians for their horses. I refine the details in my mind for late night campfire telling.

Our respective private dwellings erected, we drift back to the central fire pit. Only a few miserable twigs have been collected, a university education apparently not being sufficient to include fuel retrieval. I set to work hauling logs and 20 branches of ancient pine to the stockpile. The twenty-somethings are clueless, sipping warm beer and discussing college curriculums. There are three dogs now, much to the sawed-off one's delight. The others are thigh high, better suited to the terrain. They accompany me in a dozen forays, clamping and dragging a miscellaneous branch here and there, but generally of little help. The call of dinner stops my labors. Bratwurst sausages and gooey bread.

As usual, them who have done the least work are the first in line. I load the fire to chest high flames and we eat in silence. When the plates are burned and the kitchen mess ignored, a bottle of whiskey appears. As is custom, the cap is removed and thrown into the fire. Each takes a swig and passes it to the next in the circle. In this manner the bottle is drained very quickly. I see this as an excellent way to get everyone on a unified bacterial plan, but its efficiency is likely thwarted by the high alcohol content in the bottle. The paleo experts get louder in proportion to the growing quietness of the young ones, them being essentially boring with no experience and nothing to say.

With a few drinks in him, Ted addresses the inevitably inebriating group. But Ted has a bizarre quirk. He has an identity problem. He always refers to himself in the third person and by a name he's reconstructed.

"Hear you're going out tomorrow, Ted," says JonJon, referring to hiking out of the Lost Valley, driving away in a truck.

"Tapio has to go ooot," he says.

"What for?"

"Tapio has been here for two weeks straight. Tapio says he needs a break."

"Where ya going, Ted?"

"Tapio needs to get some things from the Salt Lake Museum. Then Tapio very much enjoys a few days in Vegas, eh?" The Canadian accent and odd words are always in the conversation. A strange lot, these people from the far north. Was it the isolation that separated him from himself? The long nights assembling some skeleton in the Salt Lake basement?

"Whatcha gonna do in Vegas, Ted? Chase a little skirt?"

"Tapio thinks he might take in a show if he doesn't have to stand in a queue."

"That would be great. What else?"

"Be nice to have a little hydro and back-bacon for Tapio, eh?"

"Wadda we gonna do without ya, boss?"

"Tapio says, don't be getting into any kerfuffle from too much Micky while Tapio's gone."

"Aye, Tapio."

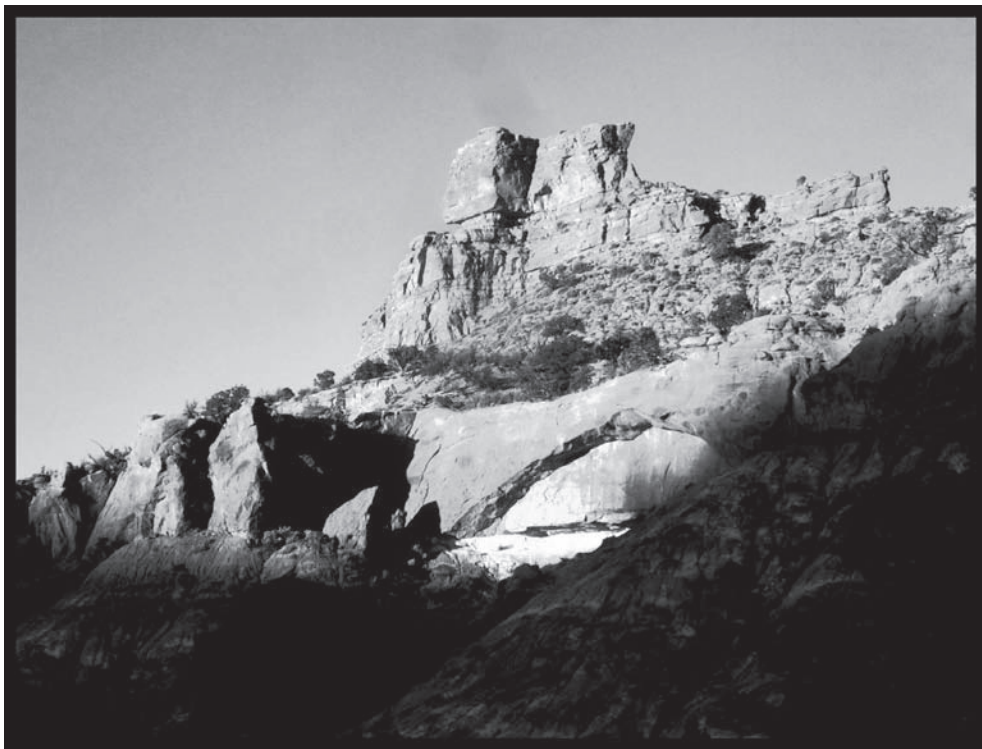
"There not be any sookies in Tapio's camp when he get's back."

“No. No sookies, Ted.”

I strike up a few words with a cute twenty-something, her first venture into the wild. I’m thinking cozy campfire cuddle, sleeping bag stir-fry later. She is certainly chugging the whiskey, which gives an aged pervert such as myself a fighting chance. She then launches into a half-hour woundology monologue about her crushed back, the constant pain, her general disability. *Sorry, sweetie, have to re-think this with the upper brain. I don’t do cripples. Don’t want to be a party to pain.* Besides her deformity, she has nothing to say. Boring is not on my dance card either. I slip away to my nest in the trees and sleep the sleep of the dead.

15 – Day of the Dog

Dawn is as quiet as a pharaoh’s tomb. I could almost imagine myself there, ankle deep in 5000-year-old dust. Behind me, an 800-foot wall of red rock, across the wash a row of towers like Egyptian sculptures, dark and jagged on the horizon. The sunlight slices through the towers, hoodoos they call them, sending shafts of light down into the valley that shatters in the trees. I survey the wreckage of last night’s drunk. Beer cans litter the ground. Two melted whiskey bottles are in the ashes of the fire. The fire starts up easily from the charred ends and the hidden mound of coals. Then I turn my attention to coffee. The “kitchen” consisting of one table littered with open relish, mustard, and ketchup bottles. A sturdy propane stove stands to the side. The wreckage shows little promise as I search for instant coffee. Water is set to boil anyway. Ted wanders in from some nest under a tree. He never uses a tent or sleeping bag, just burrows under a tree and snores in a bed of pine needles like a lost beast. He is remarkably



Courtesy of Charlie Beyer

scruffy, even more so than last night, covered as he is in dust with twigs randomly sticking out of his hair.

“Mornin’, Ted. Got any idea how they make coffee around here?”

“Tapio says that they use a French press. Here’s the press. Café in that box over there.” I rummage in the box through a vast assortment of crackers and finally locate a Starbucks bag of Jumping Jamaica Java. When I look up, Ted has shouldered a filthy ammo bag and is heading out.

“Not staying for a cup?” I ask.

“Tapio not need the café. See you in a few days.” He abruptly strides into the rising sun in the opposite direction of the “trail.” His silhouette that of a hurried bear. An odd duck, this one. *What is his true motivation here?* I wonder.

The French press had been camouflaged in the trash of torn open hot dog bun packages. The buns that were not eaten are now stale hard and covered in dust. Their first step in the petrifying process. The water boils furiously behind me but the coffee machine is laminated with yesterday’s chemistry. Eventually I get it mucked out, along with a slobbered cup, get everything stewing, find the creamer hiding under the dripping meat in a warm cooler, and settle in by the morning fire with *ahhhs* at the first refreshing sip.

A half an hour later, on my second cup, the first straggler stumbles into the pine wood smoke, rubbing her eyes and looking put out at the inconvenience of it all. This is the bad back babe, and though in designer campwear, appears disheveled. I crinkle my nose to get a whiff of her morning feminine secretions, but am not able to do so without stuffing my nose in her pert posterior. As much as I’d like to, I can’t do that because I’m a gentleman.

“Morning to you,” I say. I have forgotten her name.

“Uhnna. Good morning to you,” she says with a sigh.

“How you feeling?” I say, a little snarky, knowing that she is hung over.

“Oh, my back hurts and I have blisters on my feet. I have a bad back, ya know, the L4 vertebra . . .” *Et cetera*. She launches again into her back problem like she didn’t tell me the whole saga just last night.

More people drift in, some cheerful, others looking like they have been mugged. Eventually enough people assemble to conspire on breakfast. It is composed of four pounds of bacon and almost as many eggs. Like the Theropods who roamed here 65 million years ago, this is a carnivorous camp. I don’t recall seeing a single vegetable in any of the coolers or boxes I waded around in. The closest thing would be a garlic and vegetable Triscuit. Lauri and the corgi dog stride in, glowing in the sun. The sister is spotless in designer cargo pants, an Aspen-style feather light parka, and day-hiker shoes off the Nordstrom’s rack. Her hair is groomed and her skin is fresh and pink in the morning sun. The dog is eager to know more about the bacon that is driving its nose wild.

The chow is devoured in usual fashion, the last and groggiest arrivals to the fire pit are the most unhelpful, the greediest, charging to the front of the line. My sister is among them, taking care not to blemish herself with a drop of grease on 1500 dollars’ worth of clothes.

When all the trash is burned and the frying pans set out for the dogs to clean, Dan announces vague directions. “Today we are going to prospect up the canyon. Grab a GPS and a tool for digging. We’ll meet back here around 7 for dinner. Pack a lunch and water.”

“Do we need to record the locations of finds?” someone asks.

“Oh. Good question. Only if you find something significant.” Significant is not defined.

“Should we stick together or spread out?”

“Thank you for asking. There’s a thinking person.” No matter what stupid thing you say, Dan will always make you think that you’re the smartest person since Stephen Hawking wrote about black holes. “Stick together if you like or explore on your own. You can take a radio to contact the others if you wish. Use Channel 9. OK then. Let’s go find some dinos!”

Dan grabs two light-weight picks, one in each hand. Dave hoists the Fool Killer pick. By the time I get to the tools, all that is left is a 1928 rock hammer with the leather handle unraveling. I looked at the radio collection earlier. They are all dead, having been left turned on in storage through the winter. Finding the battery stash in the jumble of boxes is daunting. Lauri wants a radio and asks me to get one, as she will be hiking with me. Twenty minutes later I find the batteries and get a few squawks out of the thing. By then everyone has left camp. Dan and JonJon rush out first with their long legs at about 6 MPH, disappearing into the gullies at a flash. The rest scurrying along behind, like ducklings trying to keep up with Mama. They are soon indifferently outdistanced.

My sister, the dog, and I follow the track of others for awhile, but soon veer off into a branching gully that promises to lead us up onto a bench level, still 300 feet below the ridge separating this valley from the parallel one on the other side. We pass a few aimless volunteers, abandoned by their expert masters, wandering souls, not really sure what they are supposed to be doing. One wants to know how to identify bones. We show them the bone shards that are littering the ground all around them, beaming cream-colored against the gray mud stone. Trying to be involved, they dig out their notebook and record all manner of irrelevancies, fumble with the GPS that has a program only Paul Allen could understand. We leave them there in the dust as we found them and continue our trek to the upper level. From below, I see Dan in the far distance ascending the last ridge in a near vertical spot. He uses both pick



Courtesy of Charlie Beyer

axes to climb, slamming one into the crumbling mud, then the other and scaling in an upright position. He is fast too. At this distance appearing to ascend like a spider on a wall.

Our gully becomes rougher until it's a jumble of boulders, where again we must relay the dog between us. Lauri finds a turtle shell in the mud wall that is as big as a serving platter. We dig there for a spell, the dog cringing on a small ledge we have excavated for it. It dares not move. Three large sections of the shell are found which fit together beautifully, but no other bones of the legs or neck are found. It is another piece of dino "float," disconnected from its original place, tumbled here as a fragment from somewhere. Lauri wants to GPS the location and record it in her notebook, even though she knows it is not "significant." I want to just stuff it in the pack. I fumble with her GPS until it gives us some numbers, but using the way-point feature is impossible.

"What will happen to this?" I ask.

"We have to leave it here," she answers.

"So it can just tumble down the gully and break up?"

"I suppose so."

"That's stupid. We should steal it."

"Can't do that. Dan is already on my case for pocketing bones."

"But this is rubbish to the highfalutin experts. Trash in fact."

"But the rules are the rules."

"Have you ever known me to be a rule person?"

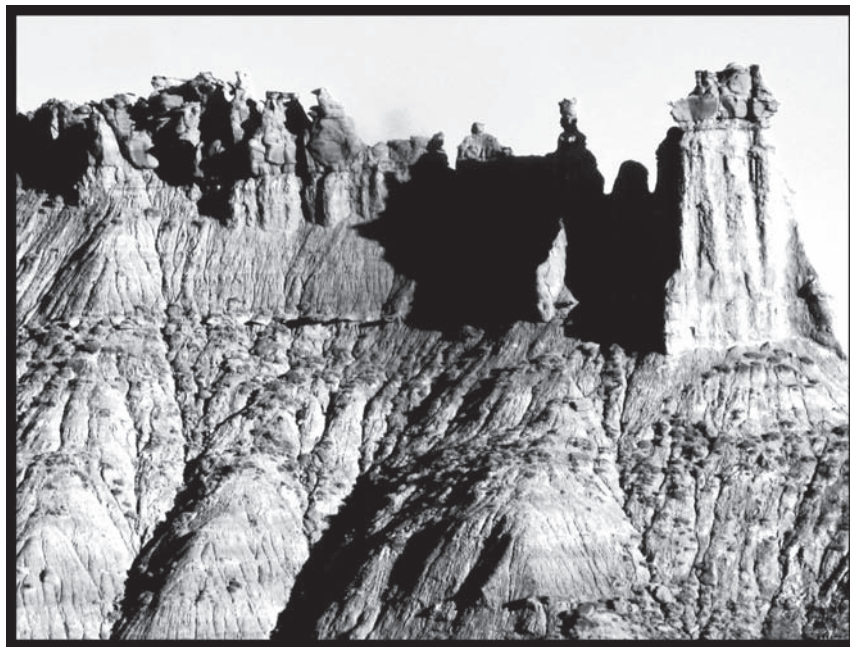
"No. Not even a little. But please leave it here, Charlie. I don't want to get into trouble."

"Ahh well. OK. That is the nature of treasure. Find it—then lose it."

"We have it on GPS."

"I am confident that will be lost too."

We scramble our way up, coming at last to a vertical ledge about five feet thick. With investigation we find foot and hand holds and clamber to the flat stone on top. The runt



Courtesy of Charlie Beyer

animal is passed up. Fool thing weighing a good 40 pounds. Who's having the experience here? The sausage or the sufferer who must bear its weight?

This level is beautiful. I think everything here is. Surrounded by a wall of 30-foot hoodoos, it stretches for a mile in one direction and a half-mile into the abrupt hill that climbs to the ridge. The slope to the ridge is the one we saw Dan going up like the human fly an hour ago. He is long gone into the wilderness now. The hoodoos are posts of a gigantic fence, topped with some oblate rock, remarkably phallic. A small forest of 15-foot trees cover half this flat. Old trees. Bristlecone pines that are each at least a thousand years old. Their dead relatives lie among them like so many bleached bones, silvery in the light, twisted and gnarled.

16 – Dog Strike

In the distance we see some of the others who are poking along the base of the hill. We head over to compare notes on discoveries and gossip about where the experts might have vanished to. The stupid dog—or is it the smart dog?—decides at this point to do the butt strike again. Sits on its haunches and smiles. This is dog language for “Eat shit, human.” Being the premier explorer extraordinaire (at least in my own mind), I don't have time for this crap. I abandon my sister who is cajoling the runt canine. At the base of the hill I find the bad back babe abstractedly scraping tiny lines in the dirt.

“Whatcha find?” I query.

“I think this is bone. I'm not sure what I'm looking for.” *This is why men rule the world,* I'm thinking. *Men are sure. Women can't tell a thought from a menstrual cramp.*

“Yes. That is dino bone. You have found it.”

“Oh, gee.”

“Where did you find it? Is there more?”

“Well, right here.” And that couldn't have been so hard. There are bones leaking out of the hill everywhere. From where I'm standing, I can see at least four places with bone rubble.

“You may be sitting on a Tyrannosaurus.”

“Oh gee. Do you think so?”

“No. Not really. Sorry. Just joking.” Damn. So gullible. I feel like I should sell her a bridge or a skyscraper.

Lauri arrives on the scene with the fat furry thing. She has made little shoes for it out of some socks she found in her expensive pack. For the 800-dollar price tag of the pack, Racked, I think she called it, it should come with doggie shoes, a color TV, and a Datsun. Mine cost 23 dollars at Wal-Mart and it has 27 zippers on it. I can't see the difference. But to the rich, it is obvious. I congratulate her on the ingenious shoe construction. It has allowed the creature to make it across the flat to this tame spot. The dog flops again in final resistance and begins chewing the socks off. My sister engages the volunteer female in girl talk, the likes of which is too banal for me to understand. It's like someone nagging me to stop smoking—it never penetrates past the earlobe. The brain never hears it.

I am antsy like a son-of-a-bitch to get over the ridge and down into the other lost valley. Too many pickers here. Too many X hormones. It feels like the place doesn't have any potential. The bone occurrences are obviously just one or two bones at most that have fractured apart in the weather of a million years and are making a small swath of their tapioca-colored splinters.

“Let's go up this draw here, Lauri. Get over the other side where your sons are. See

what they're doing over there."

"Uhh. Yeah. OK."

"Wanna go now?" I suggest. Shifting from foot to foot like a woman waiting her turn at the bathroom.

"Uhhh. In a little bit. I have to remake these shoes for Winnie," she replies.

"Headly?"

"Yes, and her name is Winnie."

"It has a sex?"

"Will take me about an hour."

"An hour! The day is two-thirds gone already. I can't stand it!" I whine miserably.

"You go on without me. We'll meet you on the top." *At last. Release from this dogged ball and chain.* But there I am again. Being the impatient jerk. I wonder how this personality trait arose in me. I haven't had any human contact in two years, so I couldn't have picked it up from anyone. Spontaneous personality devolvment. That's what I must attribute it to. Thank Allah I haven't been alone longer. I'd be a serial killer at this rate.

* * * * *



Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Many Musics

Tenth Series

*"But I'm tryin', Ringo.
I'm tryin' real hard to be the shepherd."
—Quentin Tarantino, Pulp Fiction, 1994.*

i. At Eventide

Quiet awhile. Nothing, everything changes.
Every possible way. Somewhat. I'm listening.

Trucks blare smoky noise in the traffic
on the bridge over this quiet muddy water.
Th-thump in their passing. Lullaby, reminder.
I'm listening.

Sitting with my hand-drawn book of rhythms
on one side. You sit tapping & tooting
your instrument on the other. Me listening.

Strange fish glide by in the muddy water.
Toads seeming to wait, not waiting.

I come to this place, literally, figuratively,
in long remembrance, I have nothing
to offer it. Tis refuge on my way,
from one confusion to another.

Now daylight's last hour, the day's clouds
& rain passed & gone. Traffic above clears
& passes less noisy. *Th-thump*. Pinkish-green
& blue-umber fill the sky's great window.

I read these words across the water
 to you, evening breeze carrying some,
 slapping some away. You strike & strum
 your instrument, meet me in the swirl,
 halfway. I'm still listening.

Now dark, stars, another world begins.
 I can't see you over there anymore.
 Are you there still? Will you keep playing
 anyway? I'm still listening. *I'm listening.*

ii. Glaring

Listening. Another day. Trucks blaring
 smoky noise on the bridge overhead.
 Traffic a tangled fool between here & there.

My hand-made book of rhythms is thicker
 this time, stranger, cut deeper to its
 uncertainties, what better remains often
 best listens, twice listens.

You're over there, only this muddy water
 between us, playing your instrument,
 furiously, quiet, no answers, but also
 no questions. I can't bide either.

Strange fish in my book glide by.
 Toads seeming to wait, not waiting.

Voices, many voices, they remain for me.
 Bodies, soft bodies, I disturb, I remember.

Daylight's last hour, clarity, shine.
 Trucks go & go & gone. The sky's blues
 & pinks & greens & gauzy glares grade
 down to near forever. (Listening?)

Try again. I read these words across
 the water, loud, you catch a few,
 smile, enough to play to, play back
 to me. You nod, *desire*. You nod, *want*.
 You play till I can't listen & breathe both,
 so I stop.

Now darkness, better lights, another world
 waits, a moment, but little more.

iii. Release

The barks & growls & yelps on the bridge
 above crowd close & breathe heavy,
 badly. We are half-hidden to these
 sad furies, below. The muddy waters
 travel by. Marsh grasses tall enough to kiss
 the wind.

My book of rhythms are now wrapped
 in more leaves. I leave more of the dirt
 & the dreams in, both. Listen finer for you,
 over there, it's more remembering. It's sad.

You played the words my fingers made,
 across the shore, those years, knee to knee,
 you play them still, beyond the waters,
 beyond the years, across the muddy water,
 your ironic perch.

Strange fish, on this globe forever.
 Toads, seeming, wait out the worst.

These last hours, shine gives way to shine.
 Something holds, & you play it, &
 you play it, & I try to sing.



These words touch your fingertips,
 tangle in your chords, land with a sigh.
 You laugh. You're not done playing me.

Now darkness, more laughing,
 fingers long enough to hold a heart
 by the half-mile.

iv. Evening Tide

In that dream, they built a bridge out,
 far out into the ocean, remains incomplete,
 like half-opening fist.

I hold my hand-made book of mended bark
 & dried fruit skins, I am nude & sad
 & considering that bridge.

Strange fish at its far point, diving &
 playing where it ends, colors uncertain,
 too dazzling by lights kissing heavy
 the far horizon.

Before dark comes, I climb to its walkway,
 feel its long years, feel it sway,
 feel it steady, begin to walk.

I read from my book, shakily,
 to your spectre, your many spectres,
 to every spectre alive & remembering.

Now darkness, what this dream, this bridge
 is holding me better than I am. I keep reading
 in the growls & snaps of my text, reading
 & walking. Keep singing & walking.

v. Isle of Mind

On this isle of mind, seas joining
mine to yours, but no bridge,
we've forgot the bridge.

These pages I write to near you,
to name you, to touch you,
to return you, to return you.

I listen. Twice listen. Are you playing
for me as well? Do you remember
the bridge? Could you teach me new?
What's possible by starlight? Could you
remind me?

Remind me the bridge, from isle to isle,
the how of touch, the why of breath,
the yes of blood & beat, how yes common
among all, *remember*, we too are one,
we too are one.

I say these words as I imagine
your ear, as I imagine your hand,
as I imagine your smile, your raised
instrument, struck & strummed in reply.

vi. Eventide (ii)

Will myself deeper part of world's song,
every page my throat, every page
my croon & cry. I will you near me
again, & breathe, relax. And away.

I am this book that shifts with your
heart, croons & cries, beats & breaths,
melodies of waves & daylight bowing.

Dream me a fish to nuzzle you,
 to feed you, to keep your drown.
 Dream me an answer by which your
 absence subsides.
 Dream me your peculiar shaped hands,
 upon your instrument, near to grasp again.

I listen. Twice listen. OK. The darkness
 is gentle, after all, a waiting, a waiting,
 many many hard sighs. I hold you,
 & you hold me, we lose our names &
 knowns in this embrace. You hold me,
 whoever you are, whoever I am,
 & you say. *Simple. Simple. Let be.*

vii. White Shorts

Call it want or genetics.
 Tap twice, call it music. Squeeze between
 smiling thighs when you can.
 I've tried to figure between the bars,
 & come up with my own hands,
 holding tighter.

Call it music, tap twice, want to understand
 like a good dream. There's dancing &
 hard cries tonight, your thighs wide,
 your moans blow out for me, more,
I want more.

I dream, try to understand. Dance & cry,
it all means something. What? What.

I called it want, my music's eating fuel,
 when I chased your fine ass, & yours,
 & yours. How many asses? How much music?

Want. Genetics. The psychedelic game
 flesh plays with its infinite numbers.
 Watch it dance the night. Watch it
 fuck the skies. Watch it bomb &
 brutalize itself. Watch the one flesh
 of the world tear & mend & re-create
 itself by the countless centuries.

Call it music, tap twice, a good dream,
 a better laugh. Try to understand,
 listen. Try to understand, breathe.
 Try to understand, *hmmmmmm*.
 Try to understand, awake & dream.
 Try to understand any, better to laugh it all.

viii. Away (Braiding Song)

Simple. Simple. Let be. But I wanted more.
 I dreamed to understand. Sought the secret,
 the one embedded in every moment,
 in every game, every shadow.
 Saw a good ass, sought a kind face.
 Saw skyfulls of stars, listened for the musics.

Simple. Simple. Let be. No answers here,
 just better & worse moves, words, reactions.
 Do the wars burn themselves out, truths
 in their ashes? No. Just new wars.
 I wanted more. I dreamed to understand.
 Anything at all, embedded in the moment?

Simple. Simple. Let be. I read many books,
 found many hid in them like I do,
 here to expand safely, gaze the earth
 within & mull what here to grow.
 I wanted more. I dreamed to understand.
 How can my musics soften the hard human world?

Simple. Simple. Let be. I got high,
 I drank & ate & chewed my mind wide,
 to feel more me, feel past me, learn
 how to feel we, worst hours, hardest faces,
feel we. I wanted more. Dreamed everywhere.
 Immolated pen & paper to tell.

Simple. Simple. Let be. Embraced Beauty,
 solitary star hung upon desert of night,
 embraced it all, but let nothing go.
 My old pages laugh & say jingles dangle
 when you jangle up. What need to dream
 or understand more? Just jangle up.

Simple. Simple. Let be. I want more.
 I dream to *feel true.* What the fallen tree
 tells me by its quiet passing. What the old man
 worrying about bread more needs.
 What blunt & subtle consummates this world
 every hour, how my musics better harmonize.

ix. Obscura

Simple. Simple. Let be. This dream finds me
 running, running again, I shake, I sniff,
 I sniff again. Always something tight, something
 pink in the air. Always something dead too,
 loaming & loaming. Arriving, departing. Still
 running, I shake, I sniff, I sniff again.

A room, half dim, sleeping torso on a bed,
 I sniff, something tight, something pink.
 Loaming & loaming. These hours taste old,
 taste sweet, I touch you through this dream.
 I lay near you in bed, listen for your breathing,
 I touch your shoulder, a stir. Loaming & loaming.



Is it caress here? Is it hard want?
 A bedstand now, old song on a pink radio.
 I move nearer to understand, I take
 you in some dreams, take you hard,
 take you softer, which this, if any?
 The song now louder, you stir, which
 dead are you? Which piece of my heart?
 I reach. A soft breast. A beautiful hand.
 A long unheard voice. A remembered smile.

Simple. Simple. Let be. Good advice for
 the dying & dead. I pull you atop me,
 man, woman, a beloved step, a taste.
 Sniff me, nudge me, breathe heavy
 through me, fill my fingers, cock, & stars
 with new, unspent rhythms, go down
 on me deep, spit me, fling me in the air,
 the woods, the moonlight, the sea.

I slow my running, slow, slow & stop.
 What you are, what I am, all of this,
 remains untapped, uncracked, unhad,
 unclaimed. I roll into you, finally,
 & wake in my own skin. Know nothing,
 know little, know nothing, & still try.
 Hard shake of the bones, I still try.

x. Love is Violins, Tributes, & Ghosts

*"That's how the madness of the world
 tries to colonize you: from the outside in,
 forcing you to live in its reality."
 —Jeff VanderMeer, Annihilation, 2014.*

A breath. Resume. Close my hand-made book
 of rhythms, more pages bloodstick'd.
 Wrap it thicker in leaves, green ones over
 the dried ones. Climb up to the road now.
 Time to move.

From my pouch the herbs & powders set me
 into waking sleep. So to walk through the night,
 seeing doubly, the visible land, the dreaming.
 Will the trees tell tonight, the stars above,
 which will tell me why? Seeing doubly,
 then a push, a jerk, now singly. *Ohh.*

I walk between two lovers. The one shaped
 & shaded like music, the other music herself.
 My hand to caress & heat, or shape
 the hot noise to pleated rhyme?
 More or less my sliding eye, lashing,
 hard-cutting, or open-fistly ear,
 smile-shivering tongue?

I love you both, long serve you both.
 You kneel near a fountain's spray,
 mixturing long strands of your hair,
 I watch, I listen. You are song,
 there is music. Stars above us
 worshipped because hands were meant
 to hold, but not given why.

Another breath. Another. Walk on.
 Morning's coming to the world & Dreamland
 alike. My want for you enthralled in my bones,
 my sinews, my ongoing remain. Flesh pink
 in the dawn, spasm, release. Open
 the hand-made book, leaves cast aside,
 sing for my very life, sing it, *sing it why.*

xi. Natural Recovery

I don't sleep tonight. It is still dark.
 No moon for why or light either.
 Me to reckon alone. The faces come
 unbidden, my mind unused to sleepless
 hours, no defenses for their kind.
 They come, & they come.

My mother was a scholar, I've tried & failed
 to talk to her by books. Her office
 lined to breathless ceiling but for
 one little item. A crumpled puppet,
 shaped of an astronaut, made by
 my small hands, a present. The rest lost.

My father was a singer, he sold pots
 & pans by day from a cart, but at
 night he moved from fire to fire,
 hut to hut, woods to field, singing,
 leading, leading, songs of the moon,
 the full, fleshy round bottomed
 lush lipped moon. Sang to her as
 he wished my mother to listen,
 to receive.

The first girl I loved had hair so long
 it tangled between us, like it wanted
 to join me in loving her, wanting her,
 entering her too, twisting into her moans,
 slow to let me go, so slow, drown
 with me, drown with me, do.

My greatest teacher, leading me in hikes
 to dangerous croppings. Made me choose
 among uncertain steps, choose, leap
 a little, not know, not know even more.
 Since you've moved on, I look for the
 uncertainties, wonder where they are.



Other faces, hard, soft, laughing.
 Women loving to be bitten, needing to be
 bitten, bitten, kept. Keep me. *Keep me.*
 Love me & keep me long after I go.

Brothers, eventually uncertain my devotion,
 less with me as I go. More rain,
 less moonlight. Less moonlight, more
 obsession with men as the whole of it.
 I loose you each, nor let you go,
 my hand still open for each of yours.

The night's dark hours are spent,
 here I am, in these quiet pale woods,
 alone. All of you recede, as each of you
 had, & I nod, & keep breathing.
 Keep breathing, only the blood & bone
 in me to compel, remember &
 keep breathing, love & keep breathing,
 love you all, detritus of words &
 touches & spasms, embrace myself
 like I was still a powerful young mystery,
 & keep breathing.

xii. Memento

I read my old book: "It was departures
 as well as absences. It was faces present,
 then omnipresent, then receding, then lost."
 No cover, no author. Keep as memory
 of my bookish years, when I believed
 they could persuade fears, dissipate greeds,
 give men a special hope they could feed
 their hearts with.

I am letting go, letting be. Put better,
 letting *else*. These Woods no more fully waking
 than I am. How to push it just a little more
 between us? What memories left to
 let go, let be, *let else*?

Burn this old book too. Uncertain sky
 above, make my argument. Trees beautiful
 & mostly indifferent about me. *Burn it*.
 Burn it with tenderness, page by
 page, no hate, I give you Woods back
 these words, songs, sparks, snaps, *let else*.

Now the fire begun, take my clothes,
 my cloak, shirt, everything. Too many,
 empires of lies by which rags upon
 the back, is her breast harnessed
 for display, work, or consumption?
 Does he feed from the gardens or
 their scraps, or less than this?
 The heat closer to my skin now,
 loving it so. I've only a sack left,
 survival took so many tools.

Burns hours & hours, I lie close,
 fry a little too. Let else. *Take me*,
take me, take me. Not death, not quite,
 pull me in, pull me down, into dream,
 into Dreamland, pull me down, pull me in.
 Invert me, me singing for you now,
 invert me, my cock hard & pulling for you now,
 invert me, my breathing inside out,
 my heartbeat letting else, *hmmmmmm*,
 letting else, burst smilingly, *arrival*.



* * * * *



Hands

[Classic Fiction]

Upon the half decayed veranda of a small frame house that stood near the edge of a ravine near the town of Winesburg, Ohio, a fat little old man walked nervously up and down. Across a long field that had been seeded for clover but that had produced only a dense crop of yellow mustard weeds, he could see the public highway along which went a wagon filled with berry pickers returning from the fields. The berry pickers, youths and maidens, laughed and shouted boisterously. A boy clad in a blue shirt leaped from the wagon and attempted to drag after him one of the maidens, who screamed and protested shrilly. The feet of the boy in the road kicked up a cloud of dust that floated across the face of the departing sun. Over the long field came a thin girlish voice. "Oh, you Wing Biddlebaum, comb your hair, it's falling into your eyes," commanded the voice to the man, who was bald and whose nervous little hands fiddled about the bare white forehead as though arranging a mass of tangled locks.

Wing Biddlebaum, forever frightened and beset by a ghostly band of doubts, did not think of himself as in any way a part of the life of the town where he had lived for twenty years. Among all the people of Winesburg but one had come close to him. With George Willard, son of Tom Willard, the proprietor of the New Willard House, he had formed something like a friendship. George Willard was the reporter on the *Winesburg Eagle* and sometimes in the evenings he walked out along the highway to Wing Biddlebaum's house. Now as the old man walked up and down on the veranda, his hands moving nervously about, he was hoping that George Willard would come and spend the evening with him. After the wagon containing the berry pickers had passed, he went across the field through the tall mustard weeds and climbing a rail fence peered anxiously along the road to the town. For a moment he stood thus, rubbing his hands together and looking up and down the road, and then, fear overcoming him, ran back to walk again upon the porch on his own house.

In the presence of George Willard, Wing Biddlebaum, who for twenty years had been the town mystery, lost something of his timidity, and his shadowy personality, submerged in a sea of doubts, came forth to look at the world. With the young reporter at his side, he ventured in the light of day into Main Street or strode up and down on the rickety front porch of his own house, talking excitedly. The voice that had been low and trembling became shrill and loud. The bent figure straightened. With a kind of wriggle, like a fish returned to the brook by the fisherman, Biddlebaum the silent began to talk, striving to put into words the ideas that had been accumulated by his mind during long years of silence.

Wing Biddlebaum talked much with his hands. The slender expressive fingers, forever active, forever striving to conceal themselves in his pockets or behind his back, came forth and became the piston rods of his machinery of expression.

The story of Wing Biddlebaum is a story of hands. Their restless activity, like unto the beating of the wings of an imprisoned bird, had given him his name. Some obscure poet of the

town had thought of it. The hands alarmed their owner. He wanted to keep them hidden away and looked with amazement at the quiet inexpressive hands of other men who worked beside him in the fields, or passed, driving sleepy teams on country roads.

When he talked to George Willard, Wing Biddlebaum closed his fists and beat with them upon a table or on the walls of his house. The action made him more comfortable. If the desire to talk came to him when the two were walking in the fields, he sought out a stump or the top board of a fence and with his hands pounding busily talked with renewed ease.

The story of Wing Biddlebaum's hands is worth a book in itself. Sympathetically set forth it would tap many strange, beautiful qualities in obscure men. It is a job for a poet. In Winesburg the hands had attracted attention merely because of their activity. With them Wing Biddlebaum had picked as high as a hundred and forty quarts of strawberries in a day. They became his distinguishing feature, the source of his fame. Also they made more grotesque an already grotesque and elusive individuality. Winesburg was proud of the hands of Wing Biddlebaum in the same spirit in which it was proud of Banker White's new stone house and Wesley Moyer's bay stallion, Tony Tip, that had won the two-fifteen trot at the fall races in Cleveland.

As for George Willard, he had many times wanted to ask about the hands. At times an almost overwhelming curiosity had taken hold of him. He felt that there must be a reason for their strange activity and their inclination to keep hidden away and only a growing respect for Wing Biddlebaum kept him from blurting out the questions that were often in his mind.

Once he had been on the point of asking. The two were walking in the fields on a summer afternoon and had stopped to sit upon a grassy bank. All afternoon Wing Biddlebaum had talked as one inspired. By a fence he had stopped and beating like a giant woodpecker upon the top board had shouted at George Willard, condemning his tendency to be too much influenced by the people about him, "You are destroying yourself," he cried. "You have the inclination to be alone and to dream and you are afraid of dreams. You want to be like others in town here. You hear them talk and you try to imitate them."

On the grassy bank Wing Biddlebaum had tried again to drive his point home. His voice became soft and reminiscent, and with a sigh of contentment he launched into a long rambling talk, speaking as one lost in a dream.

Out of the dream Wing Biddlebaum made a picture for George Willard. In the picture men lived again in a kind of pastoral golden age. Across a green open country came clean-limbed young men, some afoot, some mounted upon horses. In crowds the young men came to gather about the feet of an old man who sat beneath a tree in a tiny garden and who talked to them.

Wing Biddlebaum became wholly inspired. For once he forgot the hands. Slowly they stole forth and lay upon George Willard's shoulders. Something new and bold came into the voice that talked. "You must try to forget all you have learned," said the old man. "You must begin to dream. From this time on you must shut your ears to the roaring of the voices."

Pausing in his speech, Wing Biddlebaum looked long and earnestly at George Willard. His eyes glowed. Again he raised the hands to caress the boy and then a look of horror swept over his face.

With a convulsive movement of his body, Wing Biddlebaum sprang to his feet and thrust his hands deep into his trousers pockets. Tears came to his eyes. "I must be getting along home. I can talk no more with you," he said nervously.

Without looking back, the old man had hurried down the hillside and across a meadow, leaving George Willard perplexed and frightened upon the grassy slope. With a shiver of dread the boy arose and went along the road toward town. "I'll not ask him about his hands," he thought, touched by the memory of the terror he had seen in the man's eyes. "There's something wrong, but I don't want to know what it is. His hands have something to do with his fear of me and of everyone."

And George Willard was right. Let us look briefly into the story of the hands. Perhaps our talking of them will arouse the poet who will tell the hidden wonder story of the influence for which the hands were but fluttering pennants of promise.

In his youth Wing Biddlebaum had been a school teacher in a town in Pennsylvania. He was not then known as Wing Biddlebaum, but went by the less euphonic name of Adolph Myers. As Adolph Myers he was much loved by the boys of his school.

Adolph Myers was meant by nature to be a teacher of youth. He was one of those rare, little-understood men who rule by a power so gentle that it passes as a lovable weakness. In their feeling for the boys under their charge such men are not unlike the finer sort of women in their love of men.

And yet that is but crudely stated. It needs the poet there. With the boys of his school, Adolph Myers had walked in the evening or had sat talking until dusk upon the schoolhouse steps lost in a kind of dream. Here and there went his hands, caressing the shoulders of the boys, playing about the tousled heads. As he talked his voice became soft and musical. There was a caress in that also. In a way the voice and the hands, the stroking of the shoulders and the touching of the hair were a part of the schoolmaster's effort to carry a dream into the young minds. By the caress that was in his fingers he expressed himself. He was one of those men in whom the force that creates life is diffused, not centralized. Under the caress of his hands doubt and disbelief went out of the minds of the boys and they began also to dream.

And then the tragedy. A half-witted boy of the school became enamored of the young master. In his bed at night he imagined unspeakable things and in the morning went forth to tell his dreams as facts. Strange, hideous accusations fell from his loosehung lips. Through the Pennsylvania town went a shiver. Hidden, shadowy doubts that had been in men's minds concerning Adolph Myers were galvanized into beliefs.

The tragedy did not linger. Trembling lads were jerked out of bed and questioned. "He put his arms about me," said one. "His fingers were always playing in my hair," said another.

One afternoon a man of the town, Henry Bradford, who kept a saloon, came to the schoolhouse door. Calling Adolph Myers into the school yard he began to beat him with his fists. As his hard knuckles beat down into the frightened face of the school-master, his wrath became more and more terrible. Screaming with dismay, the children ran here and there like disturbed insects. "I'll teach you to put your hands on my boy, you beast," roared the saloon keeper, who, tired of beating the master, had begun to kick him about the yard.

Adolph Myers was driven from the Pennsylvania town in the night. With lanterns in their hands a dozen men came to the door of the house where he lived alone and commanded that he dress and come forth. It was raining and one of the men had a rope in his hands. They had intended to hang the school-master, but something in his figure, so small, white, and pitiful, touched their hearts and they let him escape. As he ran away into the darkness they repented of their weakness and ran after him, swearing and throwing sticks and great balls of soft mud at the figure that screamed and ran faster and faster into the darkness.

For twenty years Adolph Myers had lived alone in Winesburg. He was but forty but looked sixty-five. The name of Biddlebaum he got from a box of goods seen at a freight station as he hurried through an eastern Ohio town. He had an aunt in Winesburg, a black-toothed old woman who raised chickens, and with her he lived until she died. He had been ill for a year after the experience in Pennsylvania, and after his recovery worked as a day laborer in the fields, going timidly about and striving to conceal his hands. Although he did not understand what had happened he felt that the hands must be to blame. Again and again the fathers of the boys had talked of the hands. "Keep your hands to yourself," the saloon keeper had roared, dancing, with fury in the schoolhouse yard.

Upon the veranda of his house by the ravine, Wing Biddlebaum continued to walk up and down until the sun had disappeared and the road beyond the field was lost in the grey shadows. Going into his house he cut slices of bread and spread honey upon them. When the rumble of the evening train that took away the express cars loaded with the day's harvest of berries had passed and restored the silence of the summer night, he went again to walk upon the veranda. In the darkness he could not see the hands and they became quiet. Although he still hungered for the presence of the boy, who was the medium through which he expressed his love of man, the hunger became again a part of his loneliness and his waiting. Lighting a lamp, Wing Biddlebaum washed the few dishes soiled by his simple meal and, setting up a folding cot by the screen door that led to the porch, prepared to undress for the night. A few stray white bread crumbs lay on the cleanly washed floor by the table; putting the lamp upon a low stool he began to pick up the crumbs, carrying them to his mouth one by one with unbelievable rapidity. In the dense blotch of light beneath the table, the kneeling figure looked like a priest engaged in some service of his church. The nervous expressive fingers, flashing in and out of the light, might well have been mistaken for the fingers of the devotee going swiftly through decade after decade of his rosary.

* * * * *



Tom Sheehan

St. Basil's School for the Blind

Frenchy came here
after the raceway flooring
stabbed its 200 pounds into his skull
and shook up the optic system.

He only fell 30 feet,
but the flooring came after him
like kids playing chase just as darkness
begins to bottle up the alleys.

He felt his way to lathes,
made clumsy bookends, napkin holders,
lost the thick calluses on both hands,
snuck out at night with white cane
for a few cold beers.

They caught a woman in his room
one night in the third week of matriculation,
an iron widow doing her thing for the schoolboys,
bringing home the lap of luxury,
catching up on time.

The next day Frenchy took off
two fingers with a band saw, a message
to the administration: it's best to leave
well enough alone, total darkness
is a one-way street.

* * *

Second Revisions

(for Seamus Heaney)

I name myself
walking through the house
before I get there.

On birch floors my shoes
sound dull as wood pulses
an ancient drummer

marked time with.
These dead trees are full
of sassy talk.

A strata of air,
corporeally chilled, moves
a cubit wide in the kitchen,

a polar exercise
taking place.
I have been

other places before,
before I got there:
banging a curragh

against the Atlantic
the long watch
of a day,

wind full of slam
and salt and voice
of the seal;

blackening spuds
in a field fire,
chatting rain alive

on slow coals of sticks
like hiccups, hawthorns
for roofing and stone

markers for walls;
pressed foul as fish
in subterranean passage

with the metallic Atlantic
telling me all its
old stories,

icebergs and whales
and the loan sharks
waiting in the new land;

scavenging a city dump
for furniture, books
and bedding,

waging private wars
against prejudice, hunger,
Roscommon calling me home;

this kitchen, now,
dark-cornered, remote, out
of which I walk toward myself.

* * *



Rolling Out the Blankets in Saugus

Crouched, attentive, ears
alive in the yard, a gray
squirrel's bent like an old
safecracker waiting upon
tumbler information.

His forepaws, geared for nutting,
bark climbers, hang like hands
for clapping waiting finish,
the near silent aria of clicks,
a fallen nut, a number past zero

one more time. Will they ever hang
his picture in the post office,
grayer than he is gray, serious
just before winter, yeggman,
second story, third story man?

I wonder, does he hear it clicker down,
that nut, secret number past zero,
or tense it; how many generations
've led him to maple leaf clutch
higher than my peak, my flag pole

a-flutter? All this time, all these years
of gray squirrel, yeggman, tumble-
tuner, it's been Georgina Jostlings
just before winter, how she carried
a blanket in the back of her car to

cover sands, cooled grasses, pine needles
wet with October's last call, fall's
energies, where her cheeks positioned
dark acceptance. How'd I miss all
of that? Thinking numbers, most likely,

zero by the boards, tumblers with two minds;
arithmetic of connection, professor
Georgina, backyard squirrel, gray thing
counting as winter comes on, the longer
nights of hearing nothing, the soft fall.

* * *

Old Stones, New Walls

1.

The wind is ugly,
a surgeon on stone
bluing up old scars.

Stage-wise its voice
is operatic, sheet metal
beaten by a lackey's hammer.

An elm is humbled.
The torment is serious
in the thinnest reed of root.

A wall at my hand
is blade-cold, and whimpers;
wind is the rain is the wall.

The day is gray gelatin.

2.

My eyes love a stone
a mason lost in the wall.
Does not belong, that stone.

What charred purple threads
across its face is fire
still worn,

still buried as my father,
his hand yet warm.
Stones have liquid sires.

They heaved hot
when the valley blew up.
Old fire hordes hide in stone.

Stone walls in rain sound of steam.

3.

There is hunger here.
Have you heard the crying?
Such neutrality's a tag of death.

If I laugh my eyes sound.
Elms never make me laugh.
They are tall men on subways,

rent collectors, police sergeants,
the man from the IRS
at a consultation.

In the wind in the rain
elms break down,
their sobbing turns my stomach loose.

Hero worship's a dangerous hobby.

4.

If you love a wall,
do you begin with pieces?
When a wall gets wet,

and map-like, can you find
where you're at?
Does loneliness have a chart?

I built a wall of Friday night's
beer cans. No stones. No fire.
Wind whistles where the churchkey went.

The tiers of typewriter keys
leap of Fridays.
They bring home a wall.

Time is the ultimatum, a wall is more.

5.

Leeward now, keyed tight,
I count the strokes of wind,
the elm's yaw and yield,

the inside sounds of out:
wind in a tin chimney
sounds blowing on your palm,

a tin-rain day
chasing against the window
is a buckled knight at quest,

my father yelling affidavits
from ghostly scaffolding
becomes, "Heave! Heave!"

Love and energy stone these walls.

6.

Wind shoots firecracker ugly.
The elm quits
in a torrent of self-abuse,

and shatters on the wall.
A stone survives.
Waiting sits a seed of grass.

Elm without wind.
Oar without water.
A beaching.

Where the grass leaps up
and the elm leaps down,
a sea of air meets.
Stones sink to forever new walls.

* * *

Once You Shared But Darkness

Twilight lashes us,
which always wasn't this way,
this step in another direction.

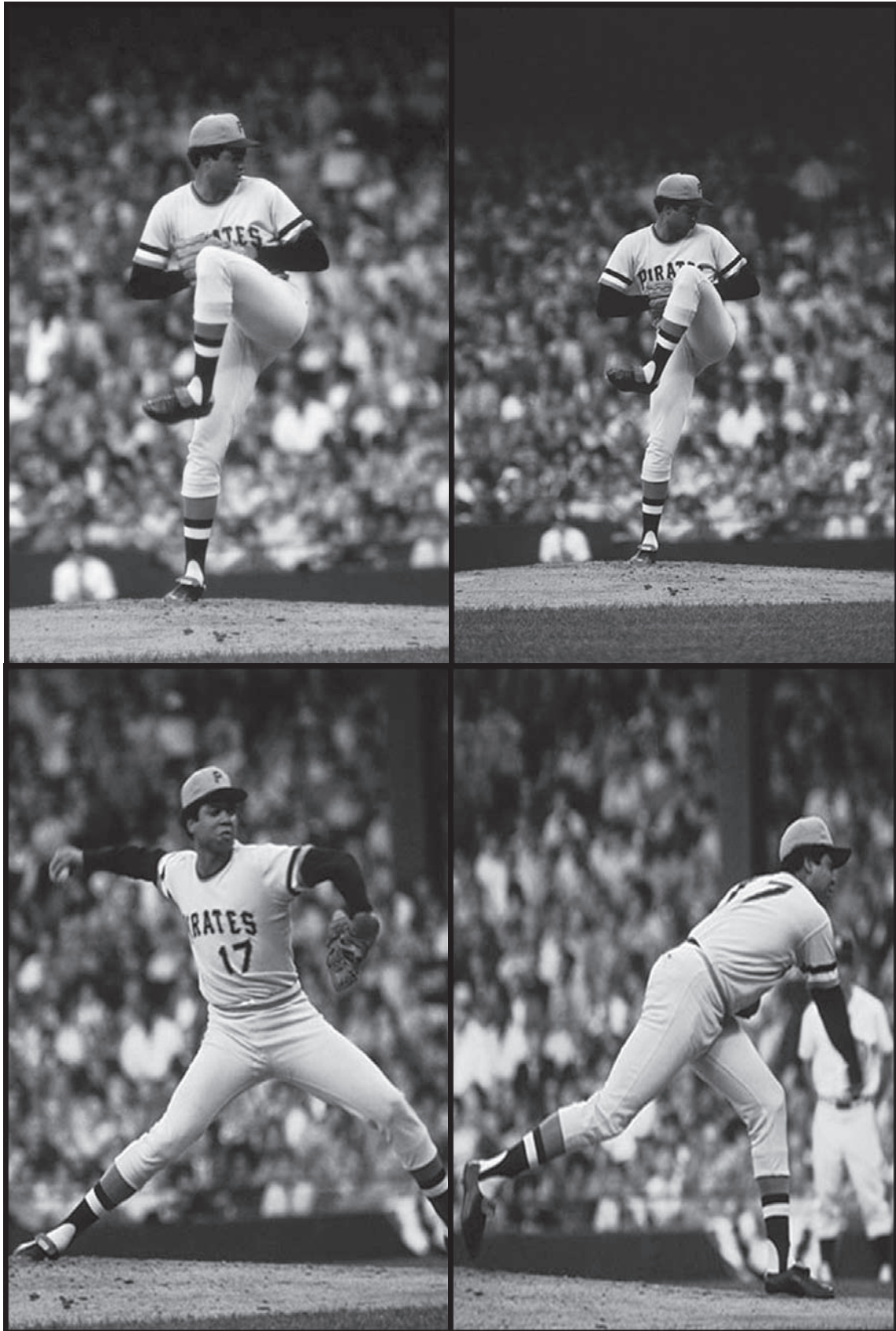
Now my mouth
is against your wetness
and all you've shaken loose.

I hear you say
you have waited
forever for this talk of mine.

Never again
will I argue for the hours
we have lost getting here.

* * * * *





Patrick Hruby



The Long, Strange Trip of Dock Ellis

[Essay]

Excerpted from ESPN.com, published on Aug. 24, 2012

<http://sports.espn.go.com/espn/eticket/story?page=Dock-Ellis>

“Get to the f—ing stadium. I got to pitch.” Decades later, Dock Ellis remembered it like this: sitting in a taxi outside the San Diego airport, running late for work, tripping on acid.

So yeah, maybe the words aren’t verbatim.

It was a Friday. That much is certain. June 12, 1970. Four years after psychedelic Pied Piper Timothy Leary invited America to “Turn on, tune in and drop out.” Four years before Richard Nixon’s resignation marked an inglorious denouement to the counterculture era. The middle of things. A purple haze. The perfect moment for the first and only known no-hitter in major league history pitched under the influence of lysergic acid diethylamide, thrown by the first and only player in major league history to inspire both a biography penned by a future American poet laureate and a seminal article in *High Times*.

Six hours earlier, Ellis had been in Los Angeles, nursing a hangover, dazed and confused, enjoying what he thought was his day off.

Two hours later, he would be standing on the mound at San Diego Stadium, throwing baseballs he couldn’t always feel, in the general direction of batters he didn’t always see, trying very, very hard not to fall over.

He was 25 years old, a right-handed starter for the Pittsburgh Pirates, armed with a big curveball and a bigger mouth, a tall, chubby-faced kid who ran like a fawn. Clubhouse cutup. Media antagonist. Iconoclastic cultural badass. In the words of a teammate, “not afraid of nothing.”

The Pirates were in town to play the San Diego Padres, starting their first West Coast trip of the season. That, too, is certain. The rest is a matter of memory, largely Ellis’, imperfect and addled, culled from interviews, articles, and books. The club arrived on Thursday, an off day. Ellis rented a car. Dropped a tab of acid. Drove north to his hometown, Los Angeles. He showed up at the home of Mitzi, the girlfriend of an old childhood buddy, Al Rambo.

“Dock,” Mitzi asked, “what’s wrong?”

“I’m as high as a Georgia pine,” he said.

The two drank screwdrivers. Smoked marijuana. Talked through the night. Eventually, Ellis fell asleep. Possibly for an hour. Probably less. Around noon—maybe earlier—he took another dose of LSD.

Meanwhile, Mitzi flipped through a newspaper.

“Dock, you better get up,” she said. “You gotta go pitch!”

“What are you talking about?” he said. “I pitch tomorrow.”

Mitzi gave him the sports page. Ellis scanned the newsprint. Padres-Pirates. Doubleheader. Friday. *Today*. Game time: 6:05 p.m. Game 1 starter: Ellis, D.

“Oh, wow,” he said. “What happened to yesterday?”

The Electric Kool-Aid No-No

Better question: What happened to Ellis? He was a 1970s sports icon, outspoken and controversial, loathed and adored. Charles Barkley with a touch of Ozzie Guillen. Ellis pitched in an All-Star Game. Was a World Series champion. He played 10 major league seasons, won 138 games, and was a key member of the pennant-winning 1976 New York Yankees. He was a husband, a brother, an uncle, and a father. He later became a drug counselor, working with addicts, inmates, and troubled youth. “If I had never met Dock, I would probably be dead or doing life [in prison],” said John Shandy, a 35-year-old Long Beach resident and recovering addict who was counseled by Ellis while incarcerated. “There’s no doubt about that in my mind whatsoever. That dude changed my life. He changed my world.”

Ellis died of complications stemming from chronic liver disease in a Los Angeles hospital on Dec. 19, 2008. He was 63. To this day, he is sorely missed by those who knew and loved him. His widow. Former teammates. Childhood friends. Legendary skateboard and music photographer Glen E. Friedman, who as a child met Ellis at New York’s Shea Stadium, struck up a friendship, and later dedicated his first book to the pitcher.

Not surprisingly, all of this has been forgotten.

The first line in Ellis’ *Los Angeles Times* obituary reads, “. . . the former major league pitcher who claimed to have thrown a no-hitter while on LSD.” Claimed? Ellis didn’t claim. Ellis expounded. Go to YouTube. Use Google. Type “Dock Ellis and the LSD No-No.” You’ll find a popular, award-winning *No Mas* short film about the game, illustrated and animated by artist James Blagden and featuring audio from a 2008 NPR interview of Ellis by Donnell Alexander and Neille Illel. A mash-up of popping psychedelic colors and stark black-and-white drawings, the film depicts the pitcher as a literal human cartoon—when an animated Ellis covers a grounder at first base, he yelps, “I just made a touchdown!”¹

This fits.

After all, Ellis could have called in sick. Stayed in Los Angeles. Never bothered with catching an afternoon flight to San Diego, let alone catching a cab to the stadium. Barring that, he could have kept his mouth shut. Instead, Ellis recorded a 2-0, no-hit victory against the Padres—and 14 years later, the pitcher confirmed to reporter Bob Smizik of the *Pittsburgh Post-Gazette* that he had played the game on acid. Smizik had asked. He knew to ask because he was working off a tip. A tip from Pirates fan David Lander, better known as the actor who played Squiggy on *Laverne & Shirley*. Stranger things have happened.

For instance, Ellis’ claiming that he received the LSD in question from Leary himself.

True story: In the summer of 1999, Ellis became the inaugural member of the Baseball Reliquary’s Shrine of the Eternals. Based in Pasadena, Calif., the reliquary is a sort of people’s bizarre Hall of Fame, an organization with no permanent home and an eccentric collection of baseball artifacts that includes the jockstrap worn by 3-foot-7 pinch hitter Eddie Gaedel, who walked in his only major league plate appearance. The morning before Ellis’ induction ceremony at the city’s public library, reliquary Executive Director Terry Cannon met the retired pitcher by the large sculpture of Jackie Robinson that stands outside City Hall.

Ellis told Cannon that Leary—a former Harvard psychology professor who championed

1. <http://tinyurl.com/84zqcd3>

the use of psychedelic drugs and once played a softball game in Mexico while tripping—had been interested in researching the effect of LSD on professional athletes. The professor had approached the pitcher: Would Ellis take a tab of LSD, play, and then report on the experience?

“I suppose Dock could have been pulling my leg,” Cannon said. “But he was very straightforward about it.”

Problem No. 1: Leary biographer Robert Greenfield said the anecdote is almost certainly bogus because, in 1970, Leary was locked up in a California prison on a drug conviction and didn’t escape until September. Problem No. 2: Ellis told Alexander that he got the acid from a UCLA laboratory. Problem No. 3: Leary’s personal archivist, Michael Horowitz, said that the Leary-Ellis connection is highly unlikely—but that when Horowitz first heard about the no-hitter, he bought copies of the pitcher’s 1971 Topps baseball card and gave one to Leary.

“Tim proudly carried it in his wallet, and showed it to any fans of sports and psychedelics he ran into,” Horowitz said.

Did Ellis . . . or didn’t he? Tony Bartirome, a former Pirates trainer and longtime friend of the pitcher, is skeptical. “Dock only gave up one hard hit that night [of the no-hitter], on a ball fielded by [Pittsburgh second baseman Bill] Mazeroski,” he said. “He might have said that just to jerk somebody off.”

Maybe so—not that it really matters. By now, the myth and man have become inseparable. So far this season, major league pitchers have thrown six no-hitters and three perfect games. None resonate like Ellis’ long, strange trip. For the psychedelically inclined, the mere notion of a LSD no-no stands as the counterculture answer to Babe Ruth’s called shot, the pinnacle of mastering one’s high. For everyone else, the game is *far out, man*, a funky bit of sports folklore, appropriated and embellished, passed around like an old baseball card. Writer and eventual Poet Laureate Donald Hall included a full, non-bowdlerized version of the tale in a 1989 revision of his 1976 Ellis biography, *Dock Ellis in the Country of Baseball*. (In the original book, Hall replaced LSD with screwdrivers at the request of Ellis, who didn’t want to antagonize Yankees owner George Steinbrenner.) Robin Williams riffed on the no-hitter during a stand-up routine. A New York City art gallery displayed and sold a baseball coated with acid. Ellis became the subject of psychedelic paintings, T-shirts, and surfboard designs. Blagden’s Internet short film has been viewed more than 2.5 million times. An online petition demands that Major League Baseball release broadcast footage of the no-hitter, and the lack of said footage has prompted conspiracy theories. (No such footage is believed to exist, although a Pirates team photographer did record a few grainy, black-and-white minutes of Ellis throwing and slipping on the mound, later broadcast by HBO.)

Over time, the game has become the thing; the acid, the story. As for the pitcher himself?

Blotted out. Just like his pain.

A Pharmacological Feast

When Ellis arrived at San Diego Stadium about 4:30 in the afternoon, he swallowed a handful of uppers—Dexamyl pills, known as “Greenies”—then walked to the dugout, where a female acquaintance was waiting by the railing.

The woman had a gold pouch, small and pretty. Inside were “Bennies.” Benzedrine pills. Another stimulant. Ellis took some, part of his usual pregame routine. The Pirates suspected

Ellis was on something but weren't entirely sure because the pitcher always acted a little nuts.

The evening was dreary. Mist and drizzle. The ballpark was mostly empty. The Padres were lousy, a year removed from their inaugural campaign, a light-hitting club that ultimately lost 99 games. Ellis struck out six batters. He walked eight. He hit Padres center fielder Ivan Murrell with a pitch. In the HBO footage, silent and incomplete, Ellis sporadically slips and stumbles during his follow-through. He later recalled a sense of euphoria. Sometimes, the ball felt big. Like a balloon. Sometimes, it felt small. Like a golf ball. Ellis couldn't always see the hitters—nor his catcher, Jerry May. He focused on May's fingers, wrapped with reflective tape. He remembered pitching erratically, balls in the dirt, the Padres batting scared, ducking and diving, hitting off the ends of their bats.

In the dugout, Ellis ignored the stadium scoreboard. He concentrated on cleaning his muddy spikes. His superstitious teammates avoided eye contact, except for rookie second baseman Dave Cash.

"You got a no-no going," Cash said.

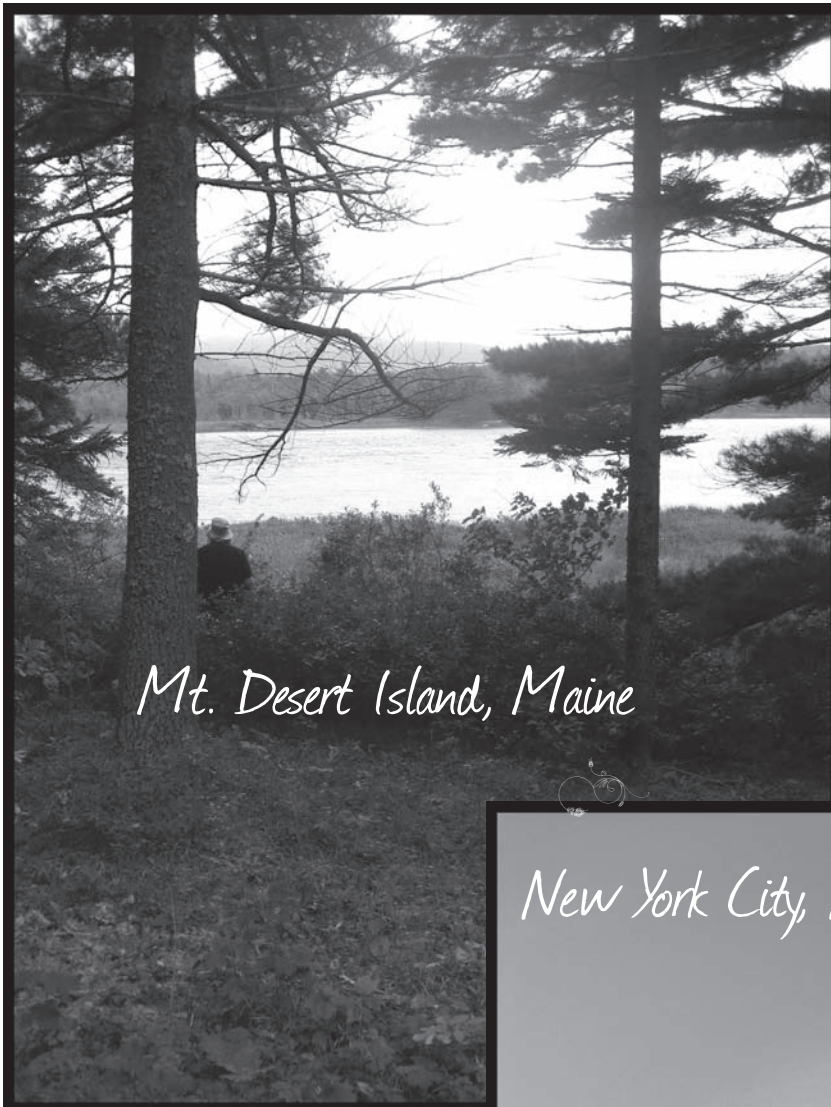
"Yeah, right," Ellis replied.

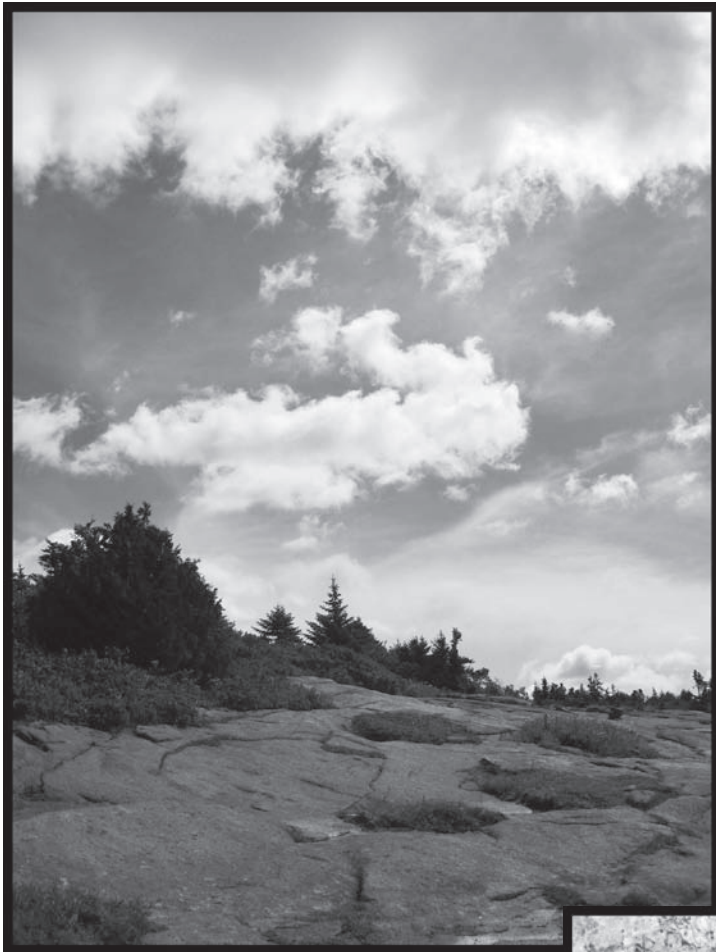
The article in *High Times* reported that Ellis saw a comet tail behind his pitches and a multicolored path to May. A few years ago, *The New York Times* claimed that Ellis saw Nixon behind the plate, calling balls and strikes. So goes the myth. The old baseball card, passed around anew. On the game's final pitch, Ellis struck out pinch hitter Ed Spiezio with a curveball. He spun around on the mound and screamed, "A m—f—ing no-no!"

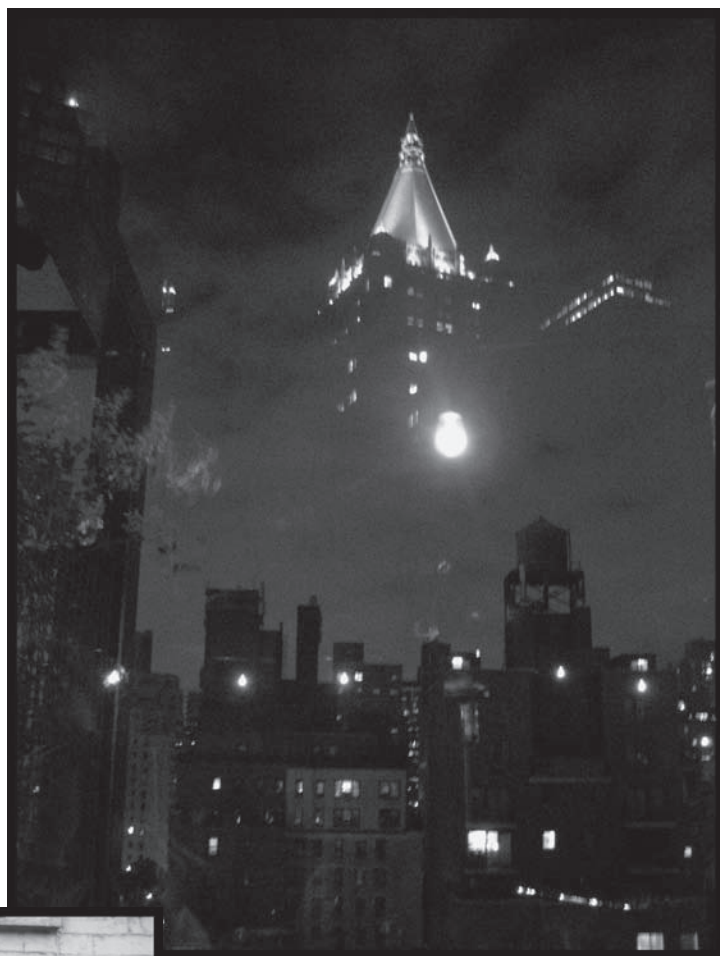
Or so he claimed to remember. Fact is, Ellis didn't remember much: When sportscaster Curt Gowdy interviewed him the next day during a nationally televised game, the pitcher was still blotted out, as high as a Georgia pine.

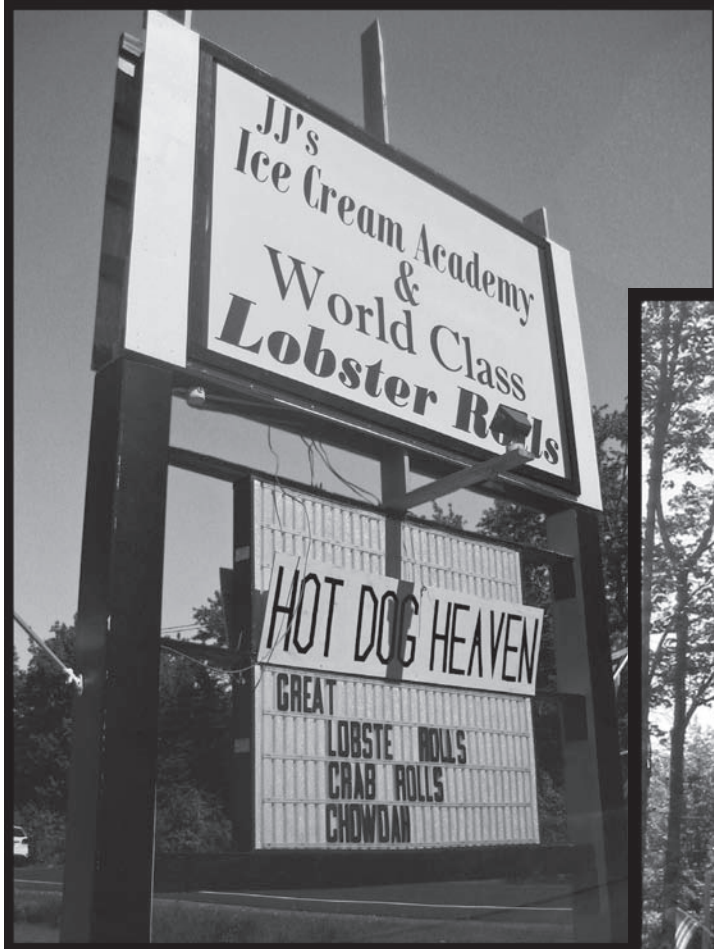
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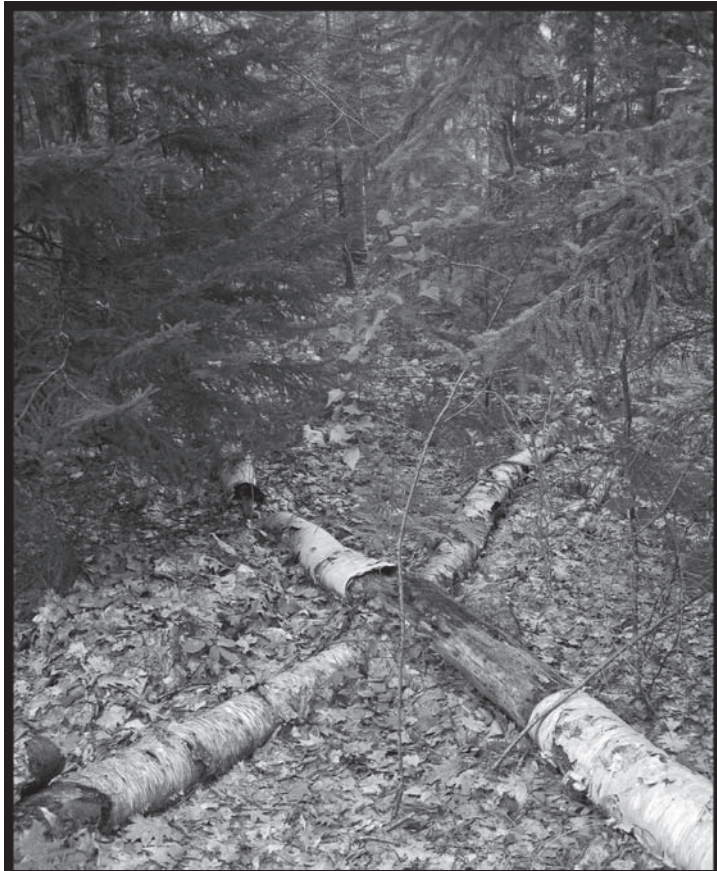


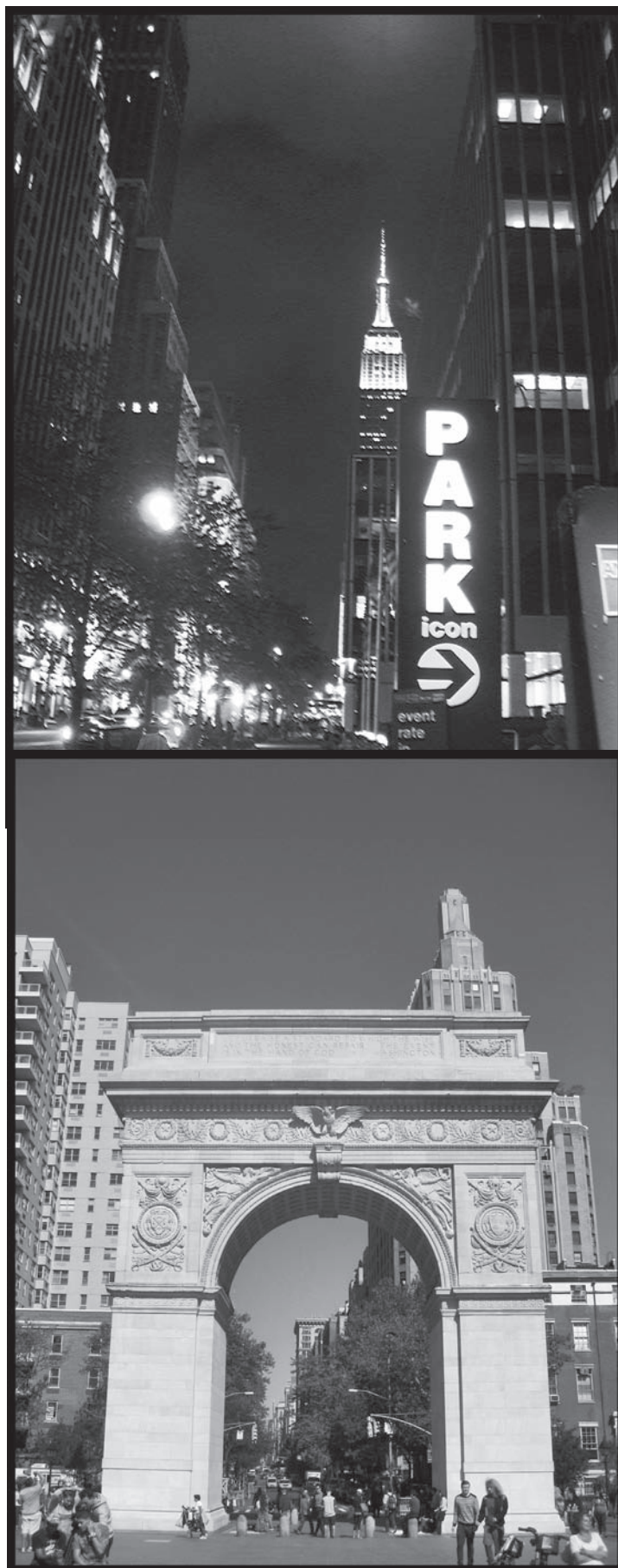


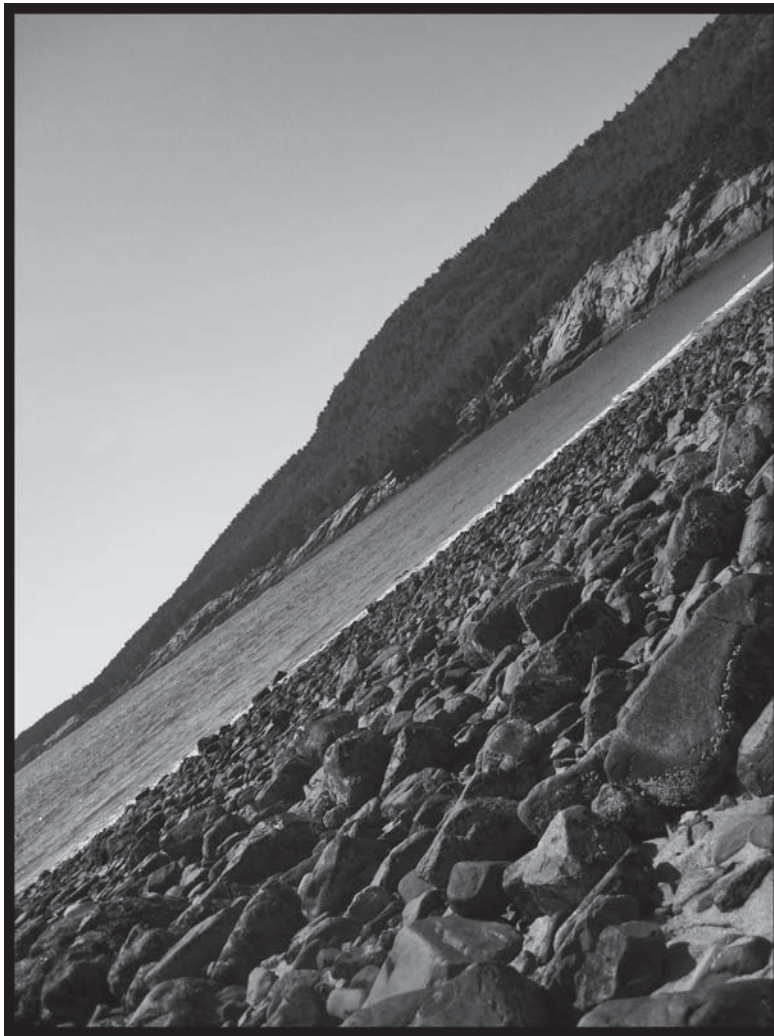












Raymond Soulard, Jr.



Labyrinthine

[a new fixtion]

Part Ten

*"Try to forget me.
Try to erase me."*

—Pearl Jam, "Jeremy," 1992.

Tis afternoon, lolling toward dusk. The bartop under my hand is old, wooden. Polished well to show its grains. Show it is valued, treasured. We tender what we love, either what we affirm or cannot deny. *We tender.*

This barroom has a television mounted in the corner. An AM-FM radio behind the bar. Pretty good jukebox over there. Six songs for four quarters. Records, too, not digital files on a chip. *We tender.*

There's an old poster of Jimi Hendrix on the wall. Woodstock '69 or Monterey Pop '67? Which one purer to his essence? Both, I suppose. Maybe I prefer Monterey because he was younger, not yet caught by fame's tit, further from his fall.

We tender. This story hasn't passed through Luna T's Cafe in a long time.

The song on the jukebox is now decades old. "*Jeremy spoke in . . . class today.*" Fills the room dangerously & familiarly both. Crackles in the 45 record. It's been played hundreds.

This notebook is thicker with pages than last I wrote it here. I think that's good. I'm glad it's thick & getting thicker.

Nobody's here. None of my old loves. Rebecca. Mr. Bob. Rich Americus. Noisy Children. Dr. Arnold T. Knickerbocker. None. Bandroom is dark & quiet too.

I don't know beyond this moment but story resumes & continues from here, wherever it's bound, coming pages.

I stand up.

I kneel. I bow my head. There are no answers to this world, none in language or somewhere outside it. I kneel before the mysteries of life I will write or say about but without answer. Want. Pain. Loneliness. Music. Dreams. There are others. Obsessing on them does nothing. It makes Art, fills pages, allows me to breathe sometimes, but it *does nothing*.

What then. If not solve then salve. Is that enough? Is that what Art can do, all Art can do? A warm wet bandage to a perennial wound? A low crooning to sleep? Comfort that the body or mind or both will fail, always fail?

I've always wondered what more, what else. I can't stand, I can't stop kneeling until something. It's all Tangled Gate. This Island. All White Woods.

If so, what then. And why kneeling? To what? The mysteries I name do not command it. I choose to. Then choose otherwise.

I stand. Take my seat back at the bar. One place as good as another. This notebook is a good one. I've had many. This pen a good one. They run out.

I look across the bar & there is my old friend. Dr. Arnold T. Knickerbocker. Dead? Alive? I don't know.

"Does it matter?"

"Let's say you're alive."

"Let's."

"Where do you stand on these mysteries?"

"I kneel too."

"It does no good."

Catches me cold his look.

"In a way, nothing does any good."

"What then?"

"You choose."

"Choose."

"You choose to do something. Think your thoughts. Move your hand. Move your body. Say something."

"And then?"

"And then something else. Movement. Time. Day. Night."

"Why?"

"Because."

"Because?"

"Just because."

"What then?"

"You choose."

"Does it really matter?"

"Yes. And no."

"Is there anything I can move from? Keep & move from?"

"This."

"This is just me . . . bitching. It's not fiction."

"You said, you wrote, 'it's all Tangled Gate. All White Woods. All Island.'"

"Yes."

"A sort of metaphysical place."

"Yes. Dreamland, too. The world roots in earth, dream, music. It's blood & bone lit by stars."

"That sounds like poetry. I don't feel like poetry."

He hobbles off his stool, a short, frail, ancient man. Overcoat & hat. Cane. To the jukebox.

Pulls out a coinpurse the age of centuries & uses coins fresh from the Civil War to feed the machine.

Amazing. The progressive rock song comes, unfurls, a bass & drums that toy & complexify under lit up organ flourishes & a guitar that unfolds & unfolds itself to nothing, & touch, & all flames—

*“Inside your fuego
we keep it rolling
Inside your fuego
we keep it rolling . . . ”*

It pours out, it fills this barroom, pours out its windows & doors

*“I ask Diego, if it was stolen
Inside your fuego we keep it rolling
Rolling
Rolling
Rolling . . . ”*

I try to get it, get it *again, care, really fucking helplessly care—*

Knickerbocker takes the stool next to me, I rock & groan in mine. This music is titanic. It cares.

He puts his hand on my shoulder & squeezes.

*“Rolling
Rolling
Rolling
Rolling . . . ”*

I let his warm old hand grip my shoulder, I let its warmth come through me, all the way through me, let this moment struggle to matter, & matter, OK, it matters, *it always fucking matters—*

All White Woods.
All Tangled Gate.
All Island.

I nod. Hold his hand on my shoulder.

“I can only do this.”

Silence.

“I can only try to do it better.”

Silence.

"It's my gift."

"The world is your gift."

"Then this is my thank you."

Hand squeezes my shoulder, as though approval.

I nod.

I'm ready.

Move on.

As I walk out the barroom door & evanesce once again, in the moment, I let for a moment, see you sitting there, looking at me, not looking at me, something I seem to know, & then of course I do not, I sniff & breathe you, your face what's owned me always, your shoulders & breasts I can only move by, fear, lust, happiness, dream, your stomach I lick down, & down, & down, till my deep is deep in you, whichever you, whichever me, *I am shit-nothing, I am shit-everything—*

The world does not reconcile, it does not cohere, it is familiar & unknown, I begin to release you, release my sniff of you, you don't know either, whichever you, *you don't know either—*

Look at every face & think:

You don't know either—

Ahh suck in the world's sugar,
its boring old poisons too—

World, you don't know either.

You don't know.

A scream in my mind to all.

Nobody knows.

The world is gift.

My Art is my thank you.

i.

I walk for a long time, city streets, whichever city, it matters & matters less, I think maybe the variations a little, but always couples happy & unhappy talking through parks, someone in the grass with a good, obsessing book, or any book, someone is hungry, someone else is murderously angry, someone born, someone dying, a lot of waiting, some hope, a lot of fear, I walk close to this all but keep moving—keep moving—

Eventually I am on my bike, not a motorcycle like Americus's, no, an old mountain bike, been my companion for years, riding, riding to get there, through suburbs important only to those living there, a long road, a bridge, over it, & a turn off, down a dirt path, & now under that

same bridge, there is a stream, a dirty stream

Lean my bike with a pat against the cement buttress upholding the bridge on this side of the water. *Whoosh, rumble, whoosh!* above. The distant sounds of a dealership, a main office calling salesmen to phone calls, via a loudspeaker. Sounds too of a high school football game. Numbers, cheers.

Across the water the two of you. The thin one & the chubby one. Of course. Passing a glass pipe. Of course. Looking at me like I've got a gun & badge.

"It's OK. I used to come here."

They look at each other. Relax an inch. Maybe.

"I arranged for you to meet the Gate-Keeper."

They freeze again.

"It's OK. I've just come to give you names."

"Names?"

I laugh.

"You've never had any."

"Who are you?"

"The guy with the pen."

"Pen?"

"Yah. Look, this won't take long, this bit of it. Pay attention."

I mean to wave dramatically or show nothing up my sleeves. Uh, wait, I've a t-shirt on. Old Crow Medicine Show. Mmmm.

"You, the skinny one. You're Ralph."

"Ralph?"

"You, the chubby one. You're Self."

"Self?"

"Listen . . ."

I turn away, climb on my bike, begin to pedal away through grassy marsh, to the path.

"Those names are important. You can find out why if you want."

They're still yelling & calling as I ride away.

They finally give up.

"He's gone."

"What kind of names are those?"

We sit down. I've got more opium. We need it.

We haven't done this in awhile. Living in that theater. A girl sort of dividing us.

"I know you don't like her."

"No. You don't get it, do you?"

"What?"



“I do like her. Why you & not me? I hear you in the bathroom. It’s not fucking fair.”
 “You’re my friend.”
 “I know. And you’re not a loser anymore.”
 “You’re not either.”
 “I am.”
 “Look, can I tell you something?”
 “What?”
 “She’s . . . strange. It’s not all that it seems.”
 “Sounds it.”
 “No, listen. She can, um, retract herself.”
 “Retract?”
 “Her. Y’know. Parts.”
 “Like her tits? How?”
 “Yah. I don’t know. Not all the way but it’s like she won’t have nipples. And her, um, pussy, it gets like, like. Like a Barbie doll. Nothing’s there. Like not even to go to the bathroom.”
 “Have you then?”
 “Done it?”
 “Yah.”
 “It’s not so easy to say.”
 “It isn’t?”
 “No. Can I just tell you?”
 “Yah, man. I won’t tell a soul. You know me.”
 “OK.”

ii.

“There was a knight & he would travel around an endless, pathless woods, observing, advising, protecting when he had to. He was quiet & brave, made friends easily, had a surprisingly sweet & kindly smile.

“Tis said he was captured by a queen or some great lady, who had him brought to her castle, imprisoned in stocks, readied for execution. And yet it did not come. Long days passed & it did not come.”

Bowie startles. This house. His father’s house. The night of a big party, never given before, but this one would fill this big house with people, music, talk, it was something important.

And here he was, hidden in the pitch dark of his bedroom, in his closet, crouched behind the many coats & jackets, most of which he did not wear.

Nestled in here with Iris. *Oh shit.* Feels her warmth, more like a growling, intelligent heat he could barely keep near.

Closes his eyes. No, he’s not the boy he was with her. Feels the years in him, the wrinkles of his life so far.

And her? She sniffs to him the same, & not. Older, like him? How?

It was she who'd been talking just now, in his ear, the strange story of the knight.

"Iris."

"Bowie."

"Wait. How do you know that name?"

"I don't know."

"How are we here together? We were kids on the night of the party."

"What . . . party?"

Bowie starts, then explains. "Listen to all those voices, the music. Listen! . . . that happened only once here."

"Were we . . . together that night?"

Bowie nods to her, in the dark.

"Nobody had caught us out. My . . . father."

"So what then? Did you bring us back?"

He sniffs again, his mind roams his memories of her body when he held her. She's the same but, like him, older.

He doesn't care. *Doesn't fucking care.*

She flows closer in his grasp, there in the dark in the back of that closet. Curls among his arms & legs, twines them impossibly close, he shivers with this, this is how she was back then, they melded, it wasn't just lust or love or the memory he held out from himself for so many years, they *melded*, their hands, where their limbs & torsos touched & twined, & she began to sing, begins now to sing, to *hmmmmmm* in his ear, he feels his body heat up, impossibly heat up, how is it this again?

He tries to think, to remember that night, it was their last untroubled, uncaught, their last & their best, they would venture into the party, watch from closets & beneath tables, & retreat to their own closet, to laugh, to kiss some more, her fears were falling away, she was releasing to him, a moment at a time, finally, he'd been so patient & loved her so much—but finally—

But something else, something *fucking* else that night, holding her again now, her wordless enjoying, her from where? how? She seems not to care like he does. Something else. *What. Who?*

Who. A very strange who. Bowie can't remember much of his looks, frail, practically disintegrating, but for a moment he & Bowie talked. Where was she?

She was down there. Licking his cock, swallowing his balls one & both, his strange alien sometimes sexually featureless girlfriend was doing unto his cock what seemed like carnal surgery, raising every nerve ending, every little hair, playing them, *hmmmmmming*, while Bowie talked to the strange frail X the Space Alien—

That's what he called himself, then, & years later at Luna T's Cafe. Those years later he would

apparently be seeking refuge, asylum, & Luna T's such a place, it's why Bowie himself ended up there for awhile—

Could she hear them talking? Were they in the back of his closet? How had he met X?

X was not on the run then. In fact, he was what Bowie became, a spy. Across worlds, maybe more but, still, a spy was a spy. A kind of mind soldier in someone else's bigger game.

Was X recruiting him that night? Was that how this began for him? A cosmic headhunter recruiting him while his nubile alien princess girlfriend gave him the worst best excruciating head he would ever get? *Ever?*

Ever. Now. Wait. *Now?* She was down there again. He almost laughed. She really didn't care how they'd been reunited, what this way.

He only said two words, to buy himself a little bit to figure. "Slower, love." It was worse, better, slower.

He closes his eyes, uses the old spy's trick to resist torture; pulls himself deep in, impenetrably in, no entries, no exit. Save now he can control it, appear impenetrable, but actually gone, a back door, a non-existent back door. Worked perfectly.

Iris doesn't care if we ever leave that closet. When we did the last time, we were taken from each other.

So I leave us in our loving twist, & I go, I go quickly through the many rooms of my father's house, using every cloaking trick I know, old ones, simple ones, looking for X. He'd said to follow, to leave her her privacy.

I can't say the years I roughly traversed that night, it's like I was traveling backwards in time. Old friends, younger, who they were in glory days nobody knew were glory days.

I kept going, those old nights at T's, those gone faces. The Asian accountant. The sarcastic preacher. That old crazy poet.

Finally, I realize something, shrug, shake myself onto a barstool at Luna T's Cafe's bar.

Shake within, compose. Listen. Red Sox on the TV, leading someone 2-1 in the 8th. Sniff. Beer. Sweat. Pussy. Taste. It's real. All this on my tongue like then, like it is now. Touch. The stool old but steady under me. My hands resting lightly on wooden bartop.

Look up. The old man, barman, Mr. Bob. Pepper-grey hair. Spectacles. A fond smile for me, always knowing but kindly, nothing more.

"Another, Bowie?"

My friends shout another for me, that I'm not keeping up.

What year? I don't know. Before all this was gone.

"I came to you that night, to show you what was possible. I glimpsed you into this."

"All the while she sucked my cock"

"All the while I sucked your cock, Bowie"

Now she's at the bar too, then now, bar, closet, beer, blowjob

She looks at me, smiles, smiles more, her face lights up blindly as I am consumed by her in that closet, then, now, I don't know when I don't know where

Iris I love you

I had to let you go

I had to let you go

I had to let you go

iii.

Call it want or genetics. I've asked that always. Every slinky ass in white shorts on summer's nights. Want or genetics? And does it matter? Does it really fucking matter?

I can't dismiss the science or the faith of a good answer. Some of it is to be found peering down deep enough, closely enough, into physical matter. There's some answers down there, & room for us to maneuver, improve, or at least change—

But not all of it's down there, or at the far end of a telescope. This universe is not truth, but truths, many of them, bound together, strangely, well, badly, truths knowable to the human eye & heart & ken, but others not, others knowable only to trees, or roaches, or stellar debris, there's burn, there's fire in these things too, & ways to the picture one human eye or even many can't see.

Or we see something light up & we call it Godd, or love, or country. We call a flash in the night by a word we will keep to remember. As we forget, night after night.

I'm no better with answers now than a hundred or a thousand pages ago, Whoever I wrote for, why. What I sought to accomplish.

I was lonely & I think I've always seen Art as a bridge out. Even if I was only keeping my own thoughts company, they meant something, they were real. The world was real. Suffering happened but it wasn't right.

So I stood a chance of something better if I kept writing. It was my path somewhere. My music into the world.

And the world's way into me, into my heart, how I let others close to me, they had to create, had to create & share it with others, brave to do so. It worked. Many many years. It works.

And still people are lonely, are silent & lonely. Still white shorts, high asses, summer nights. Still want. Still genetics.

I don't know. There is sadness. There is morning light.

iv.

Again at this bar. Red Sox winning in the 9th. Another cold mug in my hand. X next to me.

"What can I do? What am I supposed to do?"

"Better?"

"I don't understand. These times came & went. These people were mortal. We can't undo that."

"Not that."

"What then?"

"Do It Better."

"What does that mean?"

"Come outside with me."

We exit the bar, its game, its noise. Use stairs to climb to the rooftop parking lot over T's, place where many a security guard has napped after smoking many a fine blunt. Stars are pretty up here.

We have a good smoke. Of course aliens would smoke the best ganja. I start to speak.

"Bowie, let me." X coheres more than he has, there's muscle & bone to him, there's heat, this is someone who has traveled & endured centuries & miles to be here with me tonight, on this roof.

He starts to speak, to sing a little. I let, I listen.

"Call it want or genetics.

Tap twice, call it music.

I've tried to figure between the bars,

come up with my own hands,

& holding tighter

"Call it music, tap twice, understand

like a good dream. There's dancing

& there's hard cries tonight, both,

more, music, a good dream,

tap twice, more.

"I dream. I try to understand.



Dance & cry. It all means something.
What? *What.*”

He leans against me finally, frail, old, young, old. We smoke back & forth. On grass, let go awhile. On grass, let be. On grass, breathe, relax. It's all a dream. A dream of a dream. Call it music. Let be.

v.

Do it better. What does that mean? Write better than before? That's possible. It should be. What other choice but try?

Better, or different? I can't write as I did then, don't know that I would want to. And yet, some of it I read & admire.

Bowie looks at me. “Whose scene is this?”

“‘appears to be ours.’”

“Well, what then?”

“That party. Your father's party.”

“Yah.”

“Why?”

“Why did he have a party?”

“Yah. Only once. For what?”

“I never knew. He didn't tell me.”

“You were too busy fucking with Iris.”

“Yah, of course. What did I care? I wasn't a spy. I was a horny boy with possibly a real & sometimes willing for some things girlfriend.”

I laugh.

“Can I have her back?”

“Now?”

“Then, now. Yes. Look. I get it now. X the Space Alien was trying to tell me something at that party. Very important. I was too busy trying to fuck Iris finally.”

“Yes. White shorts.”

“Brother, you can't fucking know.”

“I wore them for you. I didn't like dressing like that. But I knew you'd like it. You would like me more.”

My jaw & heart & soul & cock & body drop. It's you. Really you, as you were then. And I'm me. I'm me now. I have this moment.

“Go, Bowie. Take her. Go!” says X blindly in my ears. We hand in hand chase through my father's house, did I even know how to exit, did it have doors?

But we go & go swiftly, & somehow are ignored by people in rooms & hallways, in the

entryway, coming, going, through the door, Iris in white shorts, me in whatever—

“Bowie, where—”

“Iris, do you love me?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Always? Yes?”

“Yes.”

“Through time & space?”

She laughs. Her eyes shining into mine, cars parking everywhere, people passing. She reddens.

“Yes.” Sees my look. “All of that, Bowie.”

“Do you trust me, Iris?”

“Yes.”

“And you’ll come with me.”

Reddens more. “If you want me to, Bowie.”

I am leading her away from cars & people & lights. Among trees.

“Sniff.”

“Um?”

“Sniff twice.”

She does. Does again. *Oh*. She smiles. There’s my Princess.

We walk together. Close. Closer. The trees thin, thicken, thin again.

Moonlight. There. A patch of grass in the moonlight. I lead us.

You are then, you are now,
you are whatever I wish most,
which is both, you all times,
now, then, all times, me,
better, me, better.

I kiss you & understand. My mind floods with your lights, your voice, your body, your love, I
kiss you & understand.

Me, better. Iris, me, Bowie, *better*.

We go.

vi.

We come to a clearing in the woods surrounding my father’s house. We lived on an island, I
never knew if there were others on the island too.

We sit in the clearing, it’s grassy. Iris is smiling at me.

“What?”

"Bowie."

"Iris."

"Is this what you want?"

"With you?"

"Yes. Here. All of this."

I think, twice. Honesty seems a good strategy.

"I lost you, Iris. Now here we are together. I don't know how. But I love you. I don't want to lose you again."

She listens, smiles. But she's thinking, I can tell. I had to pick the girl with the hot ass & the brain twice my size.

Honesty again, here goes, not even a strategy. I love you, Iris.

"I love you. There's not some better good where I let you go willing."

She shakes her head. "That's not it." Though, she adds with a smile, not hinting jealousy, "there are at least two other girls thinking about you & worrying about you."

I say aloud, now I'm honesty's bitch, "Christa. Gretta. Yes. OK."

"A harem, Bowie?" she's laughing.

She must love me & be OK with her feelings too.

"I don't know. It wasn't on purpose."

She laughs again. She's so fucking beautiful I put out my wrists to her.

"What?"

"Put the manacles on."

She laughs but now is thinking again.

Oh.

"We have to go back in there."

"No, we don't. That party ends & I lose you. We're going to stay clear until it's over & I haven't."

Iris is holding my hands & her blue eyes are tight upon me, such that I can't even get a comfortable look below.

"Bowie. We have to go back. And you have to trust me we won't lose each other again."

A spy isn't supposed to fall into these situations. But Iris was why I became a spy. To find her, & later to find a way to forget her.

"Why?" I ask hopelessly.

She smiles, lets me look below, well below, then tugs me back up.

"Didn't you ever wonder about me? About who I am?"

"No. I didn't think like that then. You were the most beautiful thing I had ever known. That's all I knew. That's all I know now."

"May I tell you, Bowie?"

"Will you leave me?"

"No."

"Promise?"

"I do."

I nod.

She falls into my arms, slowly, gently, slows time, I feel her slow time, I don't know how she

does this, slowing time, and talking, talking, at first *hmmmmmmmming* then eventually words, words, “I’m from another place, Bowie, from a far other place.”

Bowie hardly nods, listens. “It’s called Emandia, Bowie. It’s not there anymore.”

Trying to remember, remember, there were things Preacher wouldn’t talk a lot about. Maybe a few words. For now, was his thinking.

“If I asked you who we worked for, would you tell me?”

“Better you ask me what we work against, Garrish.”

“What’s that?”

“A belief that it’s all over. And there’s nothing can be done.”

She’s talking in my mind now, crowding out the rest. “I came here a long time ago. But it’s like there are these versions of me, across centuries.”

“Versions?”

“I follow the *Hmmm*, Bowie. I follow it through time. Long past now.”

“There’s more than one of you?”

“Yes & no. I just live different lives in different places & times. Like a flower. We’re all me.”

“Are you all as hot & too smart?”

She laughs. “Everyone of us wishes she had you, Bowie.”

“There’s only one of me. I think.”

Nods in my shoulder.

“I have a feeling you could handle more than one Bowie a lot easier than I could handle two or three of you.”

She thinks. “We’d break you.” I nod, willing to concede this. She laughs loud.

How did I forget you? What did it take? I know what it was: Preacher.

That meeting, those years ago, in that rooming house. None of it was random. I was already a spook, but you recruited me for something else.

I’d brought that girl, the niece of the owner, who’d set her up drugged & laced in a room for a series of good-paying men to fuck, brought her from that room to my friend, in another room, full of stuffed animals, bunnies & beagles & kittees & giraffes, to be cleaned, & he owed me, he owed me everything, I was returning, it was still night, my room & equipment were already packed, swept, gone, I came back, I dared come back, stupidly, to find you.

The girl was safe with him, as safe as if his balls & cock’d been cut off, clean or dirty. Yes, he wanted to fuck her, he smelled layers of men’s cum on her slender body, wanted to add his own, wanted to burn her white of the rest—

But she couldn’t see the needle feeding into his spine—blowing steadily through him, seed, seed that responded to his primal wants, he saw himself taking her to his bed, reassuring, murmuring, her seeing hope in his eyes even as he undressed her, whispering whispering, telling her to touch there, & there, to smile pretty for him, *so pretty*, her legs parting trusting

him, he was different, he was different, this was love entering her so hard & hungry & deep & hard, love, unh, *love, unh!, love, ohhhhhh*—

but he was different from the rest, it was all going on in his mind, he was showing her the bed reserved for her, behind the curtain, the bathroom so clean & with scents & soaps, soft towels, a foot locker with simple clothes for her, all well, *all well*—

rolled her over, feeling her torso tremble & shift, pushing her ass cheeks open, she breathes hard, she feels him push in her, she whimpers, again—

showing her a shade opening to a window & there a sunset over a distant forest, distant mountain—she smiles at him, wonders why Bowie left her here, *why, why, why*—he is kind, his smile soft, he feeds her bread, cut apples, lightly fruited water, is patient as she chews—

While she remains in his custody, the seeds never leave his body, not day or night, they absorb his deeper & deeper lusts, *he binds her, he cums on her pretty little tits, he bites her tight little ass, he pushes his cock into her mouth, fucks her slowly & deeply, she learns to suck better to keep from choking*—kept bifurcated like this—*fucking her*, not fucking her—tending her, *tasting her, hurting her, licking her clean*—not fucking her, soft words, water, a hand in hers as they walk to a local park, the garden, the autumnal colors—

Bowie returns for Preacher who, in turn, waits for him.

“Bowie.”

“Bowie!”

“Bowie!” Iris shakes me. Smiling.

“Were you?”

“Yes. I’m with you. You saved her, you kept her safe. You went back for Preacher.”

“She wasn’t you. I saved her & she wasn’t you.”

“It’s OK.”

“I don’t always remember the early days with Preacher. But I do remember that he said to me, ‘I can’t make you forget her entirely. And at some point she will return to you.’”

“Yes.”

“Where did you go, Iris?”

Iris releases from him a little. “He told me not to come again. He told me to go. He was powerful.”

“Aren’t you?”

“I loved you, Bowie. My power was gone in that.”

Bowie stands. “We’ve been coming back here all the years since.”

Iris nods.

"You were a spy?"

X nods.

I study the bartop before me. Shiny, shows my grubby face.

"I thought you were traveled from planet to planet, embedded, unwilling, to show your captors, um—"

"Yah, I did that. And I came here for sanctuary."

"But?"

"I wasn't captive in dreams."

"No?"

"They weren't concerned. They didn't see me as much more than a trained animal."

"Dreams."

Nods.

"For who?"

"They got me here. I'm not sure how, but the data I provided, world by world, tended me here."

"They were looking for something."

"I think so. Like following a trail, but they didn't know someone else was concocting the way."

"Why here, X?"

"My friends in dreams weren't enemies of my captors. I didn't understand it, but it was benign, tending them to this world."

Mr. Bob the barman is listening now, wiping a clean glass clean.

At that moment, Rebecca comes into the bar, up to me, kisses my lips softly, sits on the stool next to mine. I think: she's 34 now. We married 14 years ago. More? She watches this page & smirks. "You married me at 17."

I nod.

"She's from there."

"Where?"

"Emandia."

We three listening, me, Mr. Bob, Rebecca herself, are silent.

Still looks at me. "Does it surprise you?"

"No."

He nods, sips the mug Mr. Bob had slipped into his slender grasp.

"Does Rich know?"

"Not yet."

I look at you, Rebecca. "This explains how you just appeared that morning, in Cement Park, & nobody ever came to claim you."

You nod.

"You're willing?"

You nod. Your blue eyes are as beautiful as ever. "It's OK. We all need this."

"I don't know what that means."

She smiles, a bit of her jailbait twinkle back. "Nothing left behind."

I nod.

"I don't know what will come of it."

"No."

X stands, comes over to me. "I led them here, I don't know why. But she's here because of them."

I nod. "I didn't know. Someone directed Emandia this way. I thought it was their choosing, & that they tried many other worlds too."

"Few took."

Rebecca has an art pad out now, is sketching. I lean over. Oh. A gate, a tall gate. Above its highest scrollwork the legend, *for those lost*.

I smile.

"Now we'll go."

She nods & smiles too.

I look at X. "Thank you. This all makes some sense."

viii.

We leave Luna T's Cafe together, this is old, this is now, her hand is warm in mine, she is as quiet as ever, yet not unhappy, not dislocated by the news she is from Emandia.

"Maybe I always knew, Raymond?"

"How?"

"Look at me."

I stop. I look.

My.

"You're 17. But."

"Now look."

Oh.

"You're 4."

"Now."

"You're . . ."

"Something?"

"Yes."

"Where should I stop?"

"I don't know."

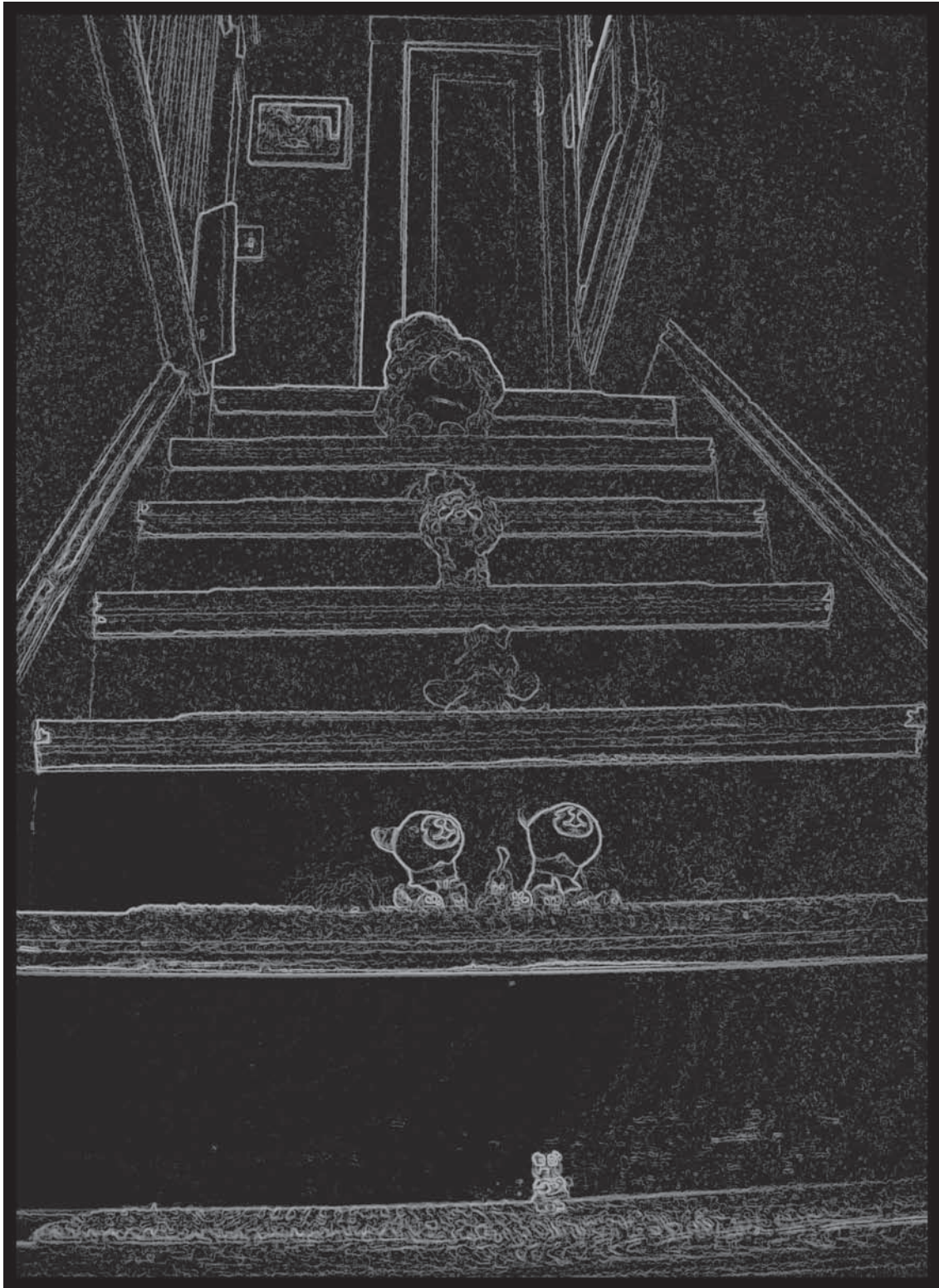
She nods, lets the question go unanswered, shifts slightly back & forth.

She smiles at me. That never changes. We walk on. She has places to show me.

First stop, the City Fraternity. Oh, old times. Guy Lemond, Frere Gregory. Godd the little pink bear. She nods to the last of these.

Pass through a courtyard, come to a long row of cells. Doors marked by number. We stop at 6. Of course.

Knock.



Godd the little pink bear. Immediately to Rebecca's hug, her age diminishing rapidly. Releases, floats before me.

"Well."

"Well."

"I don't know what you are or what to do with you now."

"Why are you here?"

"I want & need to bring my old stories back into it. This."

Nods. Go on.

"I've been reading them. I wrote steady these stories from 1989 till 2001."

Nods.

"Then she broke my heart. And I chased her across the country. And I nearly lost everything. And when I was able to write again by my own lights, there was a gulf between me & those old notebooks."

Nods.

"I didn't even have them in my possession for years. And when I did, I didn't read them. Now I am. Here you are."

"Good. But what?"

"I don't know. But maybe you can come with us?"

Godd smiles, an old shy one. "Be happy to." Fetches a hat & a cane. We leave the City Fraternity & encounter nobody else from back when. Just as well for now.

Rebecca has Godd in paw anyway, & we keep gong, a long walk, city streets, not sure what city, Hartford, Boston, Seattle, Portland, yes, & others, they lead out of the city & my interest coheres.

Woods. Oh. Yes. I stop.

"This is where I reside now. These parts. These are the White Woods."

They nod. Rebecca smirks, like there's something I don't know.

We travel pathless along for a long while. I *hmmm* a little, hoping it will help. Then, oh, *oh!* yes.

A caretaker's hut. An old friend. A naturist.

Jim Reality III. The Traveling Troubadour.

He is playing guitar on a tree stump outside his hut. Stops to puff a joint. "Ahhh!" Happy.

Sees us & happier still.

I hold back a bit.

"Which one are you?"

"Which what?"

"Are you Jim Reality III or the Traveling Troubadour?"

Blue-grey eyes twinkle. "Yes!"

"Is it OK not to choose?"

He nods. "It's all OK."

He plays for us for awhile.

*"We've got a Reservoir of Love
It's all I'm thinking of
We've got a Reservoir of Dreams
All is not as it seems
Reservoir of Love
Reservoir of Dreams
All not as it seems"*

We sit nearby, soft grass, listening. Rebecca holds my hand, just enough.

I stand. "Will you come with us, Jim?"

"Of course, Ray."

"And play as we go?"

"Naturally."

It's a long walk to the next place, a long climb into hills I'd not associated with the White Woods before. But it's all White Woods now. All Tangled Gate. All Island.

This is helping, even this much, writing these names, conjuring these ghosts, tendering them new, new flesh, here they are again.

Climbing & climbing, I lead the way now fully. Jim strumming along. It's a place well hidden even in these Woods, little more than a shack. You'd hardly know what it was. But come with us. Let's see.

ix.

Starlight Lounge—Dancing & Cocktails Nightly.

Oh. OK. Here goes. "Mind the broken step."

Here I come, with my alien-born age-shifting daughter, holding a furry pink bear deification of the creation impulse of the Universe, & my dear dead guitar-playing brother. And these woods now White Woods. Ahh. So, the review? Yes, check, here goes.

Push the door open & a mounted sign off the right within:

***Appearing Nightly
Gay Trey (& Occasionally
Perry Homo in tune)***

Still dank, still many empty tables. Still the stage at the back bathed in old, warm lights. Still the ice case off to one side, in lieu of a barman. Still my part of one shelf labeled "Salinger, J.D., aesthetic wastrel, 3rd Class."

Still my Harp Lagers of Ireland.

"Do I, Soulard?"

"I think you do. On this, we benignly diverged."

Fetches himself & Jim & Godd bottles. Looks at Rebecca. She smiles no.

"Rich"

"What?"

"You're here."

"And?"

"It was me & them. Now suddenly you too?"

"This is my place. Where I come."

"Yes, I suppose so."

"So, yes, I'm here. You brought my loved ones. Why wouldn't I come?"

I nod. "I'm glad."

"Reading the old notebooks?"

"Yah, just finished with '95."

He laughs. "For you, it's pages. For me, it's life."

I nod.

"But here we are. Now."

I nod again.

"Does the digging help?"

"Shows me how the same I've been for a long time."

"I guess."

"Richard James Americus."

"Miranda."

"How long since we've shared a scene?"

"Oh too long."

She laughs. "And you brought so many friends."

"Well, Soulard brought them here, & I showed up."

"Ahh."

Now what. Waiting for me. I try something. Was up one sleepless night. This occurred to me. I take Godd the small pink bear from Rebecca's grasp & hold before me.

Black & white top hat, a sort of candy cane style. Same for cane, black & white, candy cane style. Your fur is pink, glows pink, is musical. *Hmmmmmmms*. You snicker.

"What?"

"Is that how you are going to do it? Modernize me to your passing sensibilities?"

"Yes."

"What else?"

Your eyes are black, really black, like stones, like holes, like small forces.

You nod. "That's better."

You're injured, lame. Powerful but lame. Like creating adds, & it subtracts too.

"Hm."

"You're not drinking."

"No."

"Why?"

"It wasn't what it used to be, Rich. Do you know I live in time, too?"

"In time?"

"Yes. I age. I grow older. One day, I will, all of this will, die. Not for a long, long time. But it's true."

"So no drink."

You shake your head, your small crooked smile.

Now Rebecca. Look at you. Really look at you. Your eyes are dark brown, are so fiercely intelligent I nearly look away. No. I don't. You hold my hands, we face each other tightly.

Your hair is long, braided, to your back. Your smile undoes me. It does not age, does not change.

I lean forward to your kiss, it's soft, it's hungry, it's memory, it's unsate. It's music. It *hmmmmms*.

You lean back slowly. "Me too."

I nod. "It's how."

I blink us for an extended moment elsewhere. You walking away from me, a candy smile little your own, a skirt shorter than my breath watching.

"That's my promise, Rebecca."

Now back, her eyes hardly a flutter to acknowledge the gift. Enough.

Jim Reality III. Well. Well.

Short brown hair. Blue-grey eyes. Mischievous smile.

"I miss you."

"I know."

"How are the stars?"

"Perfect."

"*Hmmmmmm*."

"Yes. You get it. I always knew you would. You just had to mellow slow."

"I didn't."

Your breath catches. You laugh suddenly. "No. You didn't."

Gay Trey joins our little group before his show.

"You're Perry's son."

"Yes. He adopted me."

"How old were you?"

"I was 14. I'd run away from everything & everyone in my life. Finally I bought a knapsack tent, threw out what I couldn't carry, & walked into the woods. I'd been around here awhile, not too good after awhile. I was lonely, hungry."

He pauses. "Finally, I just laid down near a tree & stopped. I was just too sad of it all."

"Then what?"

"Well, it's crazy. This White Bunny came up to me, sort of nudged me up, I followed, I guess

a long time. Then I ended up here. Like I wouldn't have found it otherwise."

Silence. A smile. "I went up the steps, stumbled on the broken one. Came in. And there he was. Singing for all his life."

I leave these old & new friends together for awhile, & part the Starlight Lounge. I'm pretty sure Rebecca will wait, probably Godd, Jim, maybe Rich. Maybe not.

A few turns among trees, a hill, & I'm very gone. Just me & the nature I am part of no matter the seeming otherwise at times.

The wind blows steady as I find my way to a pond, big one, blue rippling waters. Find my way roughly among bushes & trees, the ground underfoot getting wetter as I near—near & near the water's edge, now marshy wetness, among the wildly dancing little white blooms, dance to the wind & know nothing, dance to the wind & know all—

look into the water—at my face, unseen in a while—my eyes are green-flecked brown, my face grubby & grizzled, my hair long, luckily tied into dreadlocks—

There's fish in this pond, I get one with a hook, string, patience, impatience—some berries I've tried before, not poison—I heat my water by fire & filter it with a length of Marie's hosey. She'd worn it that last night at dinner, into evening, into bed, till it came off roughly in my hands onto the floor—sent it along with me into these Woods—it's been so long—

I haven't been back to the cabin, is it still there? Is there a new caretaker? I've found myself living under the great stone bridge & it's been OK, I've made it work for me, for now.

I'm here because you're gone, it's that simple. You are my brother & you are gone. I did a tailspin from the moment they told me you'd dropped dead on your floor. Him? *No*. This was a man who played out, solo or with his band, four, five nights a week. Some nights he'd bring two girls home, three, fuck them all, make sure they laughed & fucked each other too—other nights he'd read, read seriously old, obscure books, the kind you'd get shipped from other countries—he tried to tell me—I tried to listen—

"It's not easy, John."

"Tell me."

"I've been trying to understand the world all my life. You know that."

"I do. Of course."

"Trying to simplify things. Get down to the root, a cause, a first thing among things."

"So these old books are helping you?"

"They tell me how old the search is, how it's always gone on, how nothing has been solved. How centuries of men have asked, & lived, & died."

"And all that fine poon you take home?"

"What of it?"

"No answer in all of that?"

"Answers I'm not interested in to questions I don't ask."



John stirs his drink, ginger ale on ice, considers, wants to say something.

"I told you about what happened when I got sober?"

"A little bit."

"I lived out in these Woods. I took a job as a caretaker for them. This rich motherfucker owned them. Paid me well."

"Did you like working for him?"

"Nah. Felt wrong. So I left. One fine night I walked out of my cabin in his Woods, & kept the fuck going."

"Yah, I know this. You seemed proud."

"Hey! He was an asshole. But see, what happened next—"

"You mean with Dylan & Maya?"

Whoa. Fuck. John careens up from this dream. *Shit.*

He'd never told anyone of those days before he got back together with Marie. Nobody's business anyway. But here he was now, far from her warm body & bed, in these Woods again—

I loved watching you play. I'd come to as many of your shows as I could. You could sing so beautiful but your playing was what mattered. Your long winding solos, acoustic or electric, I knew women loved them, knew you enjoyed their attention. Knew that wasn't the final point.

"So what then? Old books? Pretty girls? Are you serious or is this some leftover college bullshit of yours?"

"Hey! You quit too."

"I did. And I don't go chasing the godhead on stage or behind black thongs either."

"That's not my fault. You chose Marie."

"I sure as fuck did choose her. And it was a good choice too."

"What then?"

You were deep in your bourbons though holding your head steady. I'd been sober years & tried to say the words that count.

"You'll keep asking & looking & asking & looking until one day you don't do it so much. A little less, hardly noticeable. Then a little more. You'll rally, pull your shit together. But it's inexorable. You will give in."

"John."

"What I'm saying is that you have to do some things before that. Find the woman. Figure out which books & stick by them."

Why did I push you so hard? Where was my right in this? I loved you so much but what the fuck place was it of mine to define *your* path?

Did I doubt my own? All that led me away from these Woods & yet here I am again. Did I miss something?

Into the evening, quiet awhile. Nothing, everything changes, every possible way. Somewhat. I'm listening. Night's when these Woods loose all.

You wrote songs, quite a few. Well, more than anyone else I've known. I made a book, using what skills I have, because I wanted to write down the words to your songs, I wanted to keep them. You weren't so famous or followed that anyone recorded your shows. You never made a record. I never understood why not.

"It's not the point."

"What is the point?"

"The moment. We all share it. Does its magic. Or doesn't. It takes or it doesn't. That's all."

"What? Like the Dead or Phish? Can't capture it in a studio?"

"It's not that so much, Johnny."

"What then?"

You'd smile & shake your head. You didn't have words. Or something. I don't know. But I make a book of leaves & bark & other materials I find in these Woods, & I sit in my quiet clearing under this bridge, & I remember, & I write them out.

And then, as I'm singing them quietly to myself one night, my fire down to a fading burn, I hear noise, across the stream, other side I've not been to. Music. You're strumming to the words.

You're not there. I know it. Your crooked smile, shaggy head. That guitar you loved like nothing else you owned, which wasn't much really. I resume singing, you play on. Eventually, I stop, & you are gone. I don't sleep a long time into the suddenly empty night. Then I do.

Dream there are strange fish in the muddy stream, gliding by, hundreds, thousands. Glowing, polka dots, buzzing stripes. Now nearer me are toads too, tiny, beautiful, still, waiting, not waiting.

Is there a way back from this?

I think. First things first. What was that?

These days, your face. Smiling. Usually your hand in my shorts, if there were shorts. You loved getting your share of cock.

Was that it? Like that? No. You like that it was *my* cock, my good cock, & I was happy giving it to you. You didn't think like this—who the fuck would but an asshole like me?—but it was all true.

You were the one told me go to the woods, back to them.

"You figured some deep shit out once there, right?"

"Yah, I guess. Wasn't what I was hired to do."

She laughs. "Those Woods?"

"What?"

"You're not a girl, John." But she won't say anything else while at the same per-fucking-plexing time telling me to go find my old cabin. Her bet was the rich fucker didn't even notice I'd been away a few years.

Fuck if she didn't seem right too. My old caretaker's cabin hadn't changed since the night I'd left it, suddenly, & gone, & not come back, & here I was—

Same G5 Macintosh in the corner. Dusty. Too big a monitor for me. Takes the charm from porn to count wrinkles. Same loft bed in the corner. Same everything. Like it was the same night, & here I was, back from a walk.

Shit. Um. Um?

xi.

Americus. Rebecca. Godd the little pink bear. Jim Reality III. Miranda. McFarland. Use or lose 'em. Choosing the first.

The corner devoted to the hookah smoke & benign shimmering bulk of McFarland the owner suddenly stands up. Has he before? Does now. Speaks too.

"Miy frends," his voice Hispanic-ting'd despite his name. "It ees time for a long needed renewal of thiss place. Mirrranda, would you turn on the house lights?"

Miranda stands, a little shaky herself. Suddenly returned Gay Trey takes her hand & they find the panel near the front stage. He quietly assumes his show is delayed a night. Dandy. This is better anyway.

Up go the lights & the deep webby agedness of the place shocks into view.

"My friends, I apologize for the dee-cay you see around you," McFarland says sadly, the smoke dissipating from him. He is bearded, mustachio'd, a white three-piece suit. Handsome, though dusty & webby too.

"It was Reechar'd's chance discovery of thees establishment many years ago that revived it & thus myself & Mirrranda & Perry Homo too. Then slowly you others came.

"But now, *now* my friends, I declare a full-on renovation of thees establishment. If you are game with me, we will feel long unused buckets, wett old mops, cleen & cleen & cleen top too bot-tem!"

"The missing step too?" smiles Rebecca.

McFarland nods, causes her to wait with a raised finger, returns with a plank, nails, & hammer. Hands to me. I guess I'm still in this scene.

"Meester Soulard, if you please."

"My pleasure, sir. Señor."

Raises a hand. "No! Call me Serge when you feel so inclined."

Serge McFarland. How bout that?

So it begins. The renovation of the Starlight Lounge—Dancing & Cocktails Nightly. We mop, dust, nail, & generally clean the *fuck* out of the old place. I can't say I understand what for.

"I can," Rebecca smiles at me. Yes, I like her about 18. Newlyweds, for awhile to come.

"What?"

"Well, it's either we renovate this place back into the story or you won't write about it again. And you're not one to abandon a good setting."

I nod. Smartest girl I know, in this fixtional world.

Cleaning is not an interesting business, in & of itself. So let's leave the cleaning till its result some pages hence.

xii.

I get onto the loft bed, turning off the green-shaded lamp on the table next to it. Leave the curtains open, push them open in fact. I've no quarrel with these Woods. I know nobody owns them. I've come here with a sad heart & no secrets to keep.

If nobody has succeeded me as Caretaker, does that mean there's been none since I left with Maya & Dylan? I suppose that's clear.

"But care how?" I say sudden aloud. "I did almost nothing when I came here to this job. I wanted to know your secrets but I didn't think you needed my *care*. I had no care to give, for you or myself. I'd lost Marie. I was shit-nothing."

Pause. Listen. Nothing. Or just maybe not-nothing. Talk on. Finish it.

"It was those kids that taught me to care. They cared for me too. It wasn't perfect. I wanted that raver girl's ass bad for awhile. Somehow it didn't happen. Good thing too. Marie gave my cock a good deep sniff that first night back. Smiled funny at me, but nodded. Hers. Always had been.

"She sent me back out here. Marie. My brother died of a sudden. On stage. Crash. Him, his guitar, that was it. Dead when he hit the stage.

"And I wasn't there that night. I meant to be, like I was at all his shows I could make. We'd been out of touch awhile but he'd come back to Seattle & there we were, mixed up in each

other's business & happy for it like old days."

I stop. Listen. Yes. There's listening. Well, keep talking till you're done.

"It was so fucking *sudden*. I wouldn't want him suffering but *shit*. I went through the funeral in a coma myself. Marie really took it over, all the arrangements."

I laugh. "She'd hooked up with him first, years ago. Even hotter then. Hasn't lost much. Anyway, she saw she was going to be one of a rotating harem. He didn't have to try hard, & he usually said yes with a slow half-surprised smile."

I stand. OK, they're listening. Someone. So I have to say what I mean about all this.

"We knew each other a little but the night she decided it was over, she came to me. I did the only thing I could. I talked to her, all night, let her cry on my shoulder, listened, listened. Every hour or so I felt my cock raise up curiously & I'd excuse myself to the toilet. Stand there, fuck her fine ass in my mind over & over till I whimpered & came. About once an hour, most of the night."

I laugh. "At dawn, we're on the floor of my studio apartment, sitting under its only window, holding hands. She tries a little, testing, half wanting to. Mostly anger & revenge"

"No."

"Why not. Johnny . . . don't you like me?"

"I do."

"You have a girlfriend?"

"No."

"Gay?"

"No."

"What then?" She starts to pull up her already short skirt to show me a little more.

"Stop." Mean it. She stops.

"If I'd met you last night in some bar, I'd be inhaling your sweet cunt about now."

She giggles. I took a chance with that.

"But it's not like that. He's my brother. He's not a bad guy. Just young. Doesn't know what you need."

"And you do?"

I shake my head. "I don't. But I'd like to find out the right way. Old fashioned, at least once, for fun. Date. Flowers. Kiss on the cheek. You naked in my dreams before my bed."

She laughs. She likes my candor. Glad. I don't have much else. I can smell her scent in the deepest veins of my soul.

"So that's how we started & yet when he came back after years away, she gets me out with him like old days, trusts me to bring my cock & heart home at night. I do. And when he drops dead on his guitar, & I fucking flip, she takes care of it. Sees to his memorial with all the fans he never knew he had, & the cremation. All of it. And to help salve me, she sends me here."



Pause. "Yah. That's it. So I've been here but now I am talking to all of you. Whatever that means. And maybe I can be Caretaker for real this time. For awhile. We can care for each other."

I stop. Really stop. And listen. Wait.

xiii.

Back at the party now. The closet. Iris is in my grasp, hands twined, calm otherwise. Never know.

"So."

"So."

"Think this through with me, Iris. Your brain is as hot as your ass."

She laughs, wriggles a little among my limbs, to disturb. Iris humor.

"So."

"So."

"We're back here but we're older."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Iris is quiet, mind whirring fast & slow. I wait, vaguely wonder how to explain about her to Christa & Gretta. Harem? Nicer thought than the truth. Well, maybe.

"Bowie, what happened after you left here?"

"He took us elsewhere. My father."

"Why? Why did that happen?"

"He didn't explain things. You were gone & he told me I wouldn't follow."

"You listened? You?"

"I know. But I wasn't Bowie then. I was Garrish. He terrified me. He was all I had."

"Did your mother die?"

"I . . . I. He never told me. She was gone, long gone. So I guessed she died."

Iris is simply holding me now.

"Another big house? After this one?"

"No, it was smaller. He got sick."

"With what?"

"I don't know. He wasn't the same when we left here."

She's silent.

"It was you. He realized he was wrong to send you away. He'd taken something from me."

"Why, Bowie?"

"He knew what I didn't. He knew what you were. It scared him."

"Did he tell you this?"

"It was his look, Iris. I didn't understand it all then. I think it was simple. He was mourning my mother. Years of it. And he was scared by what you were & how much I loved you."

She's silent.

"Where did you go? I mean, my part of you."

She's silent some more. But words pend now.

"I followed the *Hmmm* for a long while. For awhile, I was in this town built on a buried spaceship."

"Spaceship?"

"It was deeply buried, a town had grown on it. Stores, houses, buildings. Trees & parks."

"How did you know?"

"The buildings all had sub-basements not in their structural plans. The park had a staircase into the earth. A door with a keypad. I broke the code. Went in. The stream had false bottoms."

Bowie laughs. "And meanwhile some poor local boy is taking you to the park for picnics & for swims in the stream. Did you ruin his eyes & skinny dip with him?"

Iris starts to talk. Stops. Twice. Wow.

"I would explore the ship, it was huge. Pristine. Empty. For the longest time I couldn't find out why it was there, deep in the earth."

"Did you?"

She nods. Very sad. Bowie lets up.

Talks again like a turned page.

"Should we talk to your father?"

"Talk?"

"Go see him tonight, Bowie."

"The night of this party."

"Yes. Why else are we back here?"

"For me to never lose you? For me to explain to my harem we have a new member, don't hit me?"

She laughs.

"We look like adults, Iris. How do we explain?"

Iris starts breathing hard, realizing.

"We don't. *He explains to us.*"

Bowie spasms. "He did this?"

"Who else?"

Yah. And fuck. And yah. Who else?

xiv.

She's waiting for them to come back. She'd sent them off to make good with each other, however boys did that. They weren't drinkers. How do stoner boys kiss & make up?

It's not like she wasn't planning by now to have both of them. That was the easy part really. It would calm them down. She would enjoy it. She'd teach them what she needed them to know.

No, it was how to get onto the set like they had. She's been chasing this movie since it was cut into walls with pig's blood. These boys were sweet candy on her path. Well, not just.

But they wouldn't bring her. Or couldn't. Maybe some of each. The Gate-Keeper would simply

fetch them. Did he know about her? Was she a danger to him?

Was she? She didn't know. She didn't know what she was. When he touched her there & there, she'd get excited, spook. Close up. She wanted to, thought about it all the time. Thought about them both. One at a time. Both. Was she saving it for the Gate-Keeper? Saving what?

They'd be gone all day & so she went to her hiding place where she'd been living for months before she'd braved coming up to the theatre. See what **RemoteLand** looked like now.

The boys didn't know how far the Nada Film School sunk into the earth. They don't see the Bridge of Glass that passes through it too. Or remember the Hotel it's in.

I wasn't lonely here. Little things talked into my ears. No bigger than thought-sized but I could hear them clearly when I got here, they walked with me to the right floor, helped me find a room. The hallways were always bright, no windows, but they helped me to find a mattress, & some extra clothes, & some boxes of food. And weeks passed as we would pick some rooms to go in to take from, & avoid others. And I always listened.

Save once. I don't know. It's like me. I want *both* boys now. Then I wanted to choose the room, sometimes.

No. Oh boy. My tiny friends disappeared as soon as I opened the door. They fled.

It was a party going on. The music was so good! Lights. Strange smoke in the air. I was wearing a short tight white dress. Eventually a boy. More a man. Smiled. Didn't say a lot as we danced, as he kissed me slowly, touched me lightly, almost not at all. And other girls watched, watched close to see if I'd keep him or not.

I moved closer to him. Smiled willing & eager into his eyes. *Teach me, take me.*

But in that deeper room he was rough. Clawed my dress from me. I felt wanted, it felt good. Then I felt something else.

My little friends had come. I struggled. This wasn't loving. They were nearer, loving me. I did something & he groaned. Again. *Again.* He was in pain. Nearly again but they stopped me. *No more. Let's go.*

We sat together in my room. They'd shown me where some old chocolate was. Years old? Centuries? I sucked on it & cried. *I'm sorry. I'm sorry.*

Eventually they sent me up to the Theatre. To my pretty boys. Back row. They were struggling & sick. They sniffed me twice, & began healing. Until I foolishly chose one.

Back in my room. My friends!
They sniff me too, but not as boys do.

“What do I do?”

They don’t know. Or don’t tell me.

They tell me they live in a deep Woods. They are happy there.

“Could I come? Could I bring them?”

They are sad. I have to walk this path. It matters.

I have some chocolate still. They sniff & smile.

“Can I bring them here?”

No. I nod. Trying to avoid this all won’t work.

“Can I ask them to bring me?”

Are you ready?

“I don’t know. But we all need to know, don’t we?”

You need to know.

“What will happen?”

You will meet him.

I want to scream. It’s been too long of this.

They’re coming soon. Get ready for them.

Yes. Pretty up. A girl & her two beaus.

There’s more to them than you know. Give them more than your kisses.

She nods. But to start, the dress she’s found. White. Short. *Oh short.*

xv.

She returns to the theatre. Almost midnight & the boys have not returned. She hopes they haven’t gone gay on her, doubts they have. Still. Boys are strange.

Decides to rebel a little & sits in the front row as the lights dim. She tingles as always to the spooky organ music that often opens the film.

The screen remains black though. Strange. The music rises & falls, begins to shake, twitter, burn?

Finally there is light on the screen, barely, tis deep space. This is new. A starship, impossibly big, long, angular, not a mark on it, no ports, no letterings of identity. Silent.

Approaching a planet at first a long way off, a blue-green dot. This one? As it nears, like the music had before, it begins to shake, twitter, burn. Its featureless metallic surface crumples, bakes red from within, nearing & nearing the blue-green world. Shuddering, gashes appear, approaches atmosphere, burns, falls through wildly, a scream emitting it that she curls away from, clutching her head. Now heading straight for land, nothing steering or braking its descent, its crash is like a volcanic explosion. Collides the ground & sinks in, continues to sink

in, through topsoil, trees, bushes, rocks beneath, older & older, layers of earth untouched in many centuries, even longer. Slows, slows. Stops. A canyon of debris & uprooted chaos a path to where it rests.

The film speeds up time, showing how eventually the earth fills in the wound, heals itself almost miraculously. Unknown times later, there is again land on top the former chaos. Things grow on it.

What's strange of all this is that that ship does not stay as deep as it was. Over time it moves upward, inch by inch until, while still broken & crushed, it is only very slightly below the ground. This, when a human village settles upon it, drawn to the fertility of the soil, the many fruit trees, the wild river nearby; it seems inevitable it will be discovered by those shoveling & digging building foundations.

Which only leads to stranger for while a few in the village know what it is built upon, most do not, & this knowledge is kept close, at best allowed out as superstition & warning.

She leans forward, shocked. The film's usual car crash never comes.

Close to dusk, the sweet drone of late summer insects. A garden, a vast garden, can't see the far edges of it. Long swathes of blooms & bushes, trees more distant, paths among all. Calm in the way natural places get. Not waiting. *There is no time.* Even if there is passage & change.

She's been working all day on a dozen projects, various tendings. The smallest shift is something she notices. Listens. Breathes. A skin of water slung over her shoulder, stringed sack of dried meat, chunks, fruit, nuts, hangs from her belt.

She isn't a young girl, the freshness about her is one of care, patience; learning, having learned, how to survive both hope & despair. Love the moment, learn better to love the path to here. Learn again & again.

Lovers, quite a few, not in awhile. She's held so many hands, twisted wetly with so many laughing & serious bodies, so many surprise arrivals, so many departures slow or swift. Since coming to this garden, she's let people go a little.

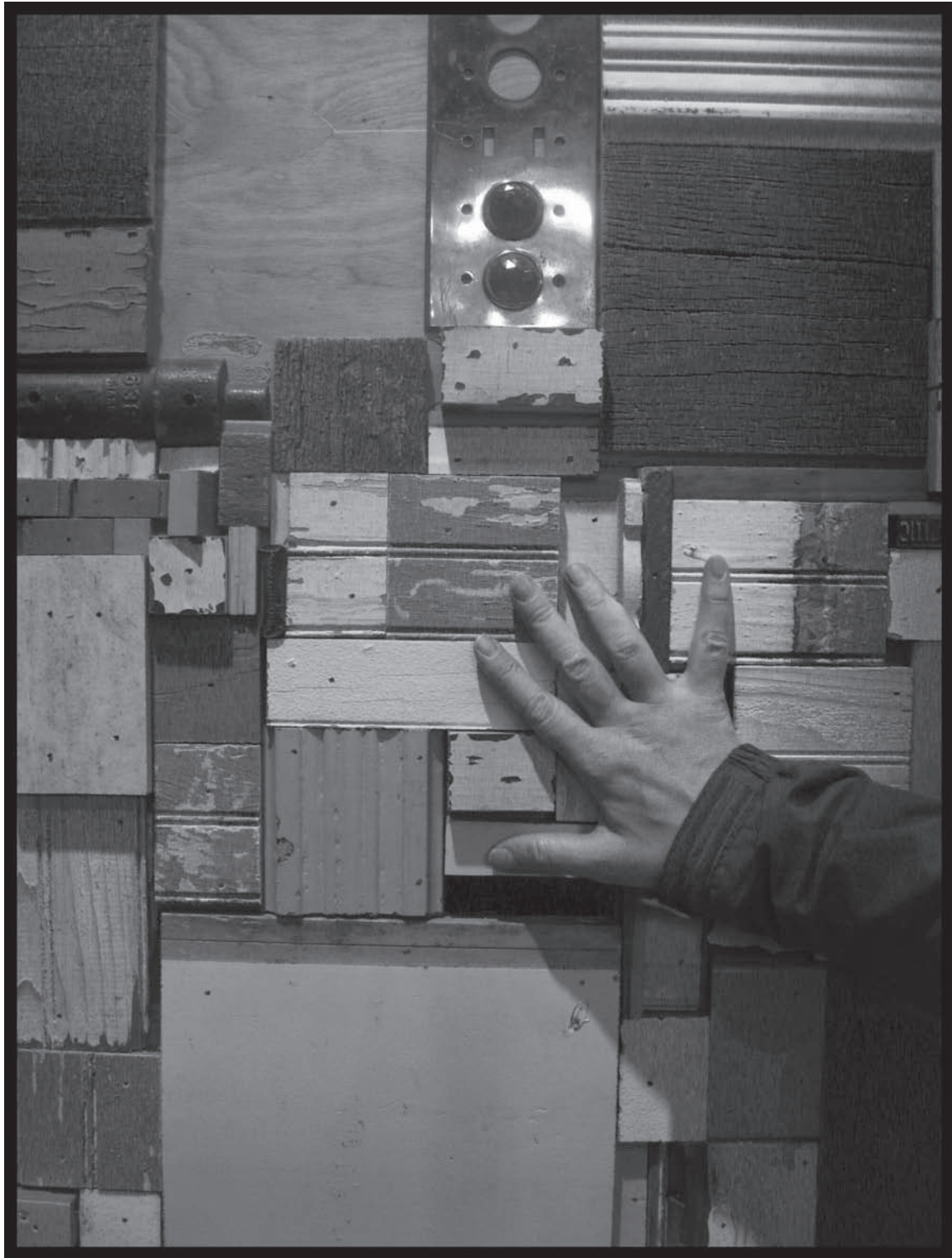
She clips, she weeds, only where needed, she moves barrels & baskets & tools around. Listens, breathes.

The white flash among the bushes & trees interests her, though it's new. She'd finally asked, & there was a laugh, & she was told she was lucky to see that much, not many did. Only a few saw more.

"More of what?"

"He's a beautiful beast who roams the gardens."

"What kind of beast?"



“Some say he’s a White Tiger. Long black stripes.”

“And others?”

“They don’t think so.”

Suddenly they’re back, the two boys. If they were smarter, they would have been one on each side of her. No such smarts.

Why had she chosen the one she had? It was silly, almost random. He’d looked at her eyes first, then her chest. All boys’ eyes ended up down there, but his had started higher. Looking for something in her face, her mind.

And they hadn’t, not yet, not fully. Oh, she’d kneeled before him, he was a sweet quick suck. He’d cum & this smile would linger on his face, peaceful, all wrinkles smoothed. Then it was gone & he was wondering where his friend was & resenting her for not just fucking him.

He was right. She didn’t know why she resisted. But, then, yes, she knew.

It was the other one. He’d become so unhappy, seeing his friend with a girl. Would it have mattered who? Four limbs, two tits, a pussy, an ass. A face for lips, maybe talking, maybe a brain. Maybe not.

Were they bad? No. They were boys. Good ones too. Another pair would have just convinced her by outnumbering her. Taking it, a couple of times, deciding then if she was worth keeping.

Which made what she did now so much more exciting. Whispered, “Tell him to sit on the other side of me.” Silence, shock. “Now?” Told. He hurried.

Her white dress filling their minds, as was her legs widening till each claimed a knee’s caress. Then each’s nearest hand was lead to nearest breast, no bra to interfere. One knew she liked a rough thumb against her nipple, the other she taught. He learned well.

Now her hands, sliding around the cold from outdoors jeans nearest each one. A snap, a zipper. Holding their two cocks as they caressed, both of them terrified, obeying, getting hard as boys do for any reason.

Squeezing, pulling, tugging, scratching a little. Finally letting her moans come a little, giving them the sounds boys or men or disintegrating bones know mean a girl or woman likes it & *wants more*. Her hands work separately, slowing, speeding, close, closer, more moans, faster, deeper, now, ready, *now*—

“Cum for me. Now! Cum for me!”

They growled, they whimpered, they thrashed. Her hands held on & she let herself go too, her moans real, her orgasm blooming then exploding out of her. Sweet jism on all ten fingers.

They all lay back a moment. Spent. Shocked.

"You both belong to me now. You will share me. That's how this will be."

Silence.

"Nod!"

They nod.

"Good. You can't lose your friendship over a girl."

They agreed. She could hear them both wondering who got to fuck her first. Boys. So much to teach.

"One more thing."

Silence.

"Next time the Gate-Keeper comes for you, to bring you on the set, I come too."

"How? We never know—"

Squeezes harder the now soft cocks still in her hands.

"Find a way. We're going there together next time."

Gives them back their goods. Their hands linger on her chest. Whatever.

Her little friends said there was more to these two than it seemed. She chose to believe them.

The film, as though paused for their play, the gardener clipping & tending & watering, now seems to resume. Which is to say, the black-striped White Tiger approaches her, blue eyes fiercely intelligent & kind.



To be continued in Cenacle | 91 | December 2014

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NEW ENGLAND

Notes on Contributors

Sherwood Anderson was born in Camden, Ohio in 1876, & died in 1941 in Colón, Panama. His most famous, most fully realized, work of art was 1919's *Winesburg, Ohio*, which was reprinted in the 2007 Burning Man Books series (<http://www.scriptorpress.com/nobordersbookstore.html>).

Charlie Beyer lives in Oreana, Idaho. His crazy funny, sometimes very sweet, sometimes nutty old man writings appear regularly in these pages. More of his writings can be found at <http://therubyeeye.blogspot.com>.

Joe Coleman lives in Melrose, Massachusetts. His magically strange poetry appears regularly in these pages. We are slowly building up toward a Scriptor Press volume of his work, likely to see print in April 2015, the 20th anniversary of Scriptor Press.

Judih Haggai lives at Kibbutz Nir Oz in Israel. It is always a pleasure to receive a fresh batch of her haiku, learn her beautiful soul's latest news. Her work can be found online at: <http://tribes.tribe.net/poetryjams>.

Nathan D. Horowitz lives in Vienna, Austria. Chapters from his epic travel memoir *Nighttime Daydreams* appear regularly in these pages. More of his work can be found online at: <http://www.scribd.com/Nathan%20Horowitz> and <http://lordarbor.bandcamp.com>.

Patrick Hruby lives in Washington, D.C. He is a contributor to sportsonearth.com, & an adjunct professor at Georgetown University. His essay on Dock Ellis, which is excerpted in this issue, is certainly worth reading in full.

Catfish Rivers lives in Oak Ridge, New Jersey. A gallery of his artwork appeared in *Cenacle* | 72 | April 2010. This issue features for the first time a gallery of his dandy photography.

Gareth Rodriguez lives in Connecticut. I think he's a preacher man these days. The delightful illustrations for this issue's *Notes from New England* were done by him for a periodical he & I & friend GC published in 1992. 'Twas called *Sixes and Sevens*, & was our last & most ambitious work together. Wishing you every good thing, Gareth. Boo!

Tom Sheehan lives in Saugus, Massachusetts. His wonderful poetry & prose appears regularly in these pages. No matter his heart condition or the chaos the world spawns around him, Tom is up every morning before dawn at his keyboard, writing, writing, writing . . .

Kassandra Soulard lives in Melrose, Massachusetts. Watching her work on this journal, getting its design & visual content just right, is one of the true happinesses I experience on a regular basis.

Raymond Soulard, Jr. lives in Melrose, Massachusetts. If you see me with a pen & notebook, going at it hell for leather, know, at least in that moment, that I matter, am using my space in the world for good purpose.

Victor Vanek lives in The Dalles, Oregon. His merry prose-poems were last featured in *Cenacle* | 89 | June 2014. It is always a delight to see someone find their writing voice, feel the air beneath them as they begin to fly into the music, wonder where their songs will take them next.





But I'm tryin', Ringo. I'm tryin' real hard to be the shepherd.
--Quentin Tarantino, Pulp Fiction, 1994.

